

A SHEEP IN WOLF'S CLOTHING.

I.

"COME now, Balkens; do you mean to say that you have the impudence to call this punch?"

"My dear de Montussan, listen . . ."

"Drop the 'de,' you old flatterer. My father called himself plain Montussan, and it's quite good enough for anything I can do with it. I didn't spring from Olympian loins."

"I thought that . . ."

"Besides, that's nothing to do with my original question. Do you dare to call this punch?"

The speaker, who had chosen to adopt this tone of arrogant authority, was a large man with fair hair turning grey, who looked forty-five, and was really thirty-eight. Eyes, forehead, and face had aged in a fashion that denoted habits of dissipation, uncontrolled and unconcealed. The scene of his demonstration was the studio of the painter, Balkens, in Paris. Montussan stood in the middle of the room, his long hair thrown back, and holding

by its foot a big Bohemian glass of quaint contour that held the intoxicating beverage. Half turning round on the stool where he sat facing his easel, the painter was ready with a smiling answer. Had another artist been present, the scene might have given him an admirable subject for a sketch. On the easel, surrounded by a glittering new frame, an exquisite picture of colour attracted attention. The best thing in it was the gallant figure of a horseman in Louis Quinze costume, who bore at a gallop through the fight a banner blazoned with the fleurs de lys. His pose gave the entire canvas a tone of triumph.

"Well, my dear fellow, since you must have an answer—yes; in this neighbourhood we do call that punch."

"You're making fun of me, Mr. Balkens."

"Not at all."

"And you must be horribly Belgian to treat me so disrespectfully."

Balkens emitted a scandalised "Oh!"

"Disrespectfully, I say. You're not a man to render a service. It's give and take with you. I've friends who lend me a pound now and then, and whom I never pay."

Balkens was about to proffer his purse.

"You're not one of them."

"I'm sorry for it," the painter said.

"I come to you as a comrade," Montussan went on, making the doubtful punch tremble in the light, "I come to you as a comrade."

"And I am glad to see you as such."

"I find you bothered like a tortoise that's invented a

velocipede. You ask my opinion of the wretched daub which you had managed to turn out all alone . . ."

"And you were good enough . . ."

"I was fool enough, you mean, to take the trouble of handling your brush and palette. They had never had such a splendid time of it before."

Balkens glanced at his picture with a smile.

"And I stuck you there in the foreground a dashing hussar, who lights up your canvas—you will not deny it—and adds at least ninety-five per cent. to its value."

The Belgian's gesture feebly protested.

"And when I ask for a bowl of punch as a reward for my work, or in recognition of my courtesy, you send to some bankrupt pothouse for the deuce knows what infamous brew, where they have not even condescended to put in enough sugar, or the few drops of tea without which nobody not ashamed of living would look at punch."

Despite his indignation, Montussan was rapidly emptying his glass filled to the brim, and the more he drank, the greater grew his anger against the drink.

"Mr. Balkens," he exclaimed at last, "you're a cub ! Cub in my mouth means cad. I am sorry to tell you so, and to do it I must be remarkably angry."

"Sir, you insult me," returned the pacific Belgian in so tranquil a tone that it would have convulsed a conventicle of Quakers.

"Insult you ! I should say I did, and with the most deliberate premeditation too."

"In that case, sir, I shall have the honour of sending two friends to you this evening."

"So I should hope. Only I beg you to remember this, that I do not intend to fight you until you have paid me for my share in this picture. The Jew, Gunerius, is going to give you two thousand francs for it to-morrow."

"And what do you say that your share is worth?"

The question appeared to recall Montussan to a sense of the shamefulnness of his demand; but heated by the punch, and possessed by an incessantly growing fury, he filled his glass to the brim, and raising it to the light, looked lovingly at it as he said—

"I was wrong to speak of payment. All your means would not pay me if I estimated my work at its real value."

Balkens looked at him without understanding.

"You owe me nothing," Montussan added; then, with a motion as prompt as a glance, he flung the contents of his glass against the canvas. Hot drops of the spirit spurted back from the painting into the painter's face.

Balkens advanced furious. He was about to take immediate vengeance for the insult; but Montussan's resolute attitude daunted him, and he contented himself with shrugging his shoulders and murmuring—

"Drunkard!"

"Drunkard!" the Bohemian echoed, with a disdainful laugh. "If you mean by this word that I like to get drunk, you are right. When I am drunk I have the happiness of even forgetting your existence. When I am drunk, folly and cowardice and plagiarism do not exist for me, and I am almost happy."

Here the studio door opened, and a young man entered.

"Ah! here is a man," exclaimed Montussan. "How do you do, Riaux?"

"How are you, old man? But what's in the wind? You look desperately excited."

"Just now, Mr. Balkens, a Belgian artist, informed me that I'm a drunkard. He might add while he's about it that I'm an idler, a ne'er-do-well, a night-bird; that I have every vice; and all the other little compliments I am accustomed to. But let him know that if the people who abuse me most paid me half what I have made them earn, I should be richer than the lot of them."

"He's right there," said the newcomer heartily.

"Enough of this," Montussan went on. "I shall want you, Riaux, as my second, as I am going to fight this gentleman, whom I have insulted."

"Nonsense! are things as bad as that?"

"Ay! I gave him a dressing, and then I gave his picture, that I had worked at, a washing."

"There you were wrong, Montussan."

"He chose to play a practical joke on me by offering me some confounded mixture which he calls punch. I passed it on to my hussar; he gets furious; I call him a 'cad;' he answers 'drunkard.' I expect his seconds, and I'll kill him. The filthy drink which he ordered is finished. It must have cost quite a franc and a half, Mr. Balkens. Well, here is five francs; you can give the surplus to the poor, unless you choose to put it in your money-box."

And throwing a five-franc piece at the Belgian's feet, Montussan took his hat and the cane, from which he seemed inseparable.

"Good-bye, Riaux. I'll see you this evening."

The door slammed and he was gone.

"What does this nonsense mean?" Riaux asked, after a somewhat embarrassing pause.

"It means that that blackguard . . ."

"Pardon me, I must ask you not to call him such names in my presence. He has many vices—you heard him confess as much—but what he will not confess is that he has a heart as well; I cannot say a noble one exactly, but still a heart large enough to share, as he does his talent, with many people."

"You see that, in a moment, he has destroyed the work of three weeks."

"Tell me how it happened."

"I asked him," Balkens said in the tone of a man who is preparing a falsehood, "I asked him a little advice as to the attitude of my standard-bearer here."

"A little advice supplemented with a little work, eh?"

The Belgian was mute.

"You ought not to do it, Balkens," said Riaux dryly. "You have a reputation; therefore, instead of taking advantage of Montussan, you ought to make him work and sell his pictures."

"Would he be willing?"

"That's just it. Get him to work without his knowledge. He'll never consent to do anything for his own benefit. A strange fellow," he added slowly, speaking to himself.

"Stranger than pleasant," Balkens said.

"Did you not know him?"

"This is the third time that I have seen him. When I

showed him my sketch, he asked, 'do you stand a bowl of punch?' I did not quite know what he meant, but said, 'yes,' at haphazard."

"Ah! you should have said, 'no.'"

"So I see now. He took my place and brushed in the horseman whom you see there. He astounded me."

"I remember one day at Labor's, the sculptor's," Riaux replied, "Montussan was lying on an old sofa smoking a hideous pipe, and drinking. Labor was modelling the head of his 'Satan in Revolt,' which made all that noise at the Exhibition the year before last. He could not get at the expression at all. Montussan was looking at him and chewing the stem of his pipe thoughtfully.

"'Hang it!' Labor cried in a rage, 'can I not render what I feel, what I know, what I see?'

"Montussan, with his feet resting on an old cabinet several inches above his head, leapt up suddenly, drained his glass, pulled his coat off and turned up his shirt sleeves, and, pitching his pipe out of the window, said—

"'Wait a bit, old man.'

"He took Labor by the shoulders, pushed him aside, and taking his place by the stool, seized and began to knead a lump of clay. It was wonderful; the stuff melted in his hands as if by magic. As the face took form, Labor murmured—

"'The devil's in the man! He has guessed everything that I have been dreaming, all that I have been studying, puzzling over in my head for the last six months.'

"In two hours Montussan turned out that grand head, glorious with infernal pride, that finally consecrated

Labor's reputation. I have told you all this, Balkens, because I want you to see that Montussan is not to be treated like an ordinary trifier."

"I quite believe you. But he has terrible moments."

"Do not provoke them. There's only one man who can tell him the truth about himself without offending him—I am he."

"Well, make him listen to reason," said Balkens; "for I should be sorry to cut throats with him about a piece of tomfoolery like this."

"The more so, I dare say, that yours, as he told you, is probably the throat that would come in for the most cutting."

Balkens' grimace sufficiently indicated the little pleasure which this prospect afforded him.

"If he really does want to fight," Riaux added, "I do not think that I am altogether inclined to prevent him. In letting him work for you, you gave in, for the first time, I daresay, to an impulse that was unworthy of a conscientious artist."

"What can I do, then?"

"Apologise."

"But the insult came from him. After all, you had better discuss the matter with my seconds. You'll see them at the café."

Riaux's errand with the Belgian artist was a trifling one; when it had been fulfilled the men separated, and Balkens set forth in search of seconds who would be disposed to make light of the dispute.

Knowing where to find Montussan, Riaux repaired to

a little café at Montmartre, where the former was waiting for him. Riaux asked his friend to dinner, and, on the way thither, rated him severely. The Bohemian listened and said nothing.

"I begin to believe that you have lost all shame, and would sell your name for a glassful."

"Perhaps," the cynic returned.

"I hate to see you flinging away all the precious gifts of your nature, in studios where you are disliked, where you are not even known."

"I was just passing that fool's door . . ."

"And you went in coolly to get drunk. You sicken me, Montussan, and you enrage me."

"Pshaw ! why, I'm not worth it."

"But you are worth it, you beggar, you ; I know you are."

"You think you know. Vanity will be the death of you."

"Good heavens ! you're not thirty-eight ; you could be a painter, a sculptor, a poet ; you have only to choose."

"Take care, Riaux. Do not talk about my lyre. It's only a penny whistle."

"Oh, you're a bore with your affected scepticism. Once for all, I am just going to tell you all I have on my mind."

"You've got a sermon of which you want to get rid? Go on. I'm chum enough not to refuse you that satisfaction. So, we were saying that I'm a detestable scamp."

"I was saying that you might drink as much as you like, absorb your eternal punch, and remain the incor-

rigible Bohemian whom you always will be, but yet, that if you chose to do as much for yourself as you do for others, you would soon have made enough money . . ."

"To drink more punch? Never. It's impossible," Montussan interrupted.

"Ah! well, I see that it does not even trouble you to know how disgrace is thickening every day about you."

Montussan stopped in the middle of the pavement and raised his hand.

"Those are hard words, my dear Riaux; but they do not surprise me. Yes; I am pretty well dead to shame. It's finished. The fall is irremediable. Do not sorrow about it. It's a fatality. Upon my word, I think that they ask men's souls, before they come into the world, what they'll be, and that I chose . . . There, do not let us talk about it," he added, walking on, and snapping his fingers above his-head.

"But we will talk about it."

"I tell you I'm incurable. And, after all, I only hurt myself. I've nobody belonging to me."

"And your friends?"

"My friends! They're deucedly rare birds, my friends. There's you . . . and, find the others."

"Well, for my sake, why do you not do as I tell you, instead of pervading strange studios and mixing yourself in ridiculous broils, because of the more or less alcohol there is in the punch which you have made some one pay for?"

"And that I've deucedly well earned too."

"Do you not think that I, who know, must feel humi-

liated when I try to justify or defend you, to hear that my friend is called a parasite and a sponge?"

"Who has said that?" cried Montussan, his forehead reddening.

"As if it mattered!"

"True; whoever said so is a keen observer, and I am awfully sorry that you take any interest in me, since what is said about me provokes you."

"Montussan, you'll vex me beyond endurance."

"Riaux, my old chum," said Montussan then, in a strangely grave voice, "I told you: it's too late. What is the use of drunkards' oaths? If you care enough for me to feel hurt at all the scandal which I bring on myself, drop me—let us separate. Think I'm dead, and let us see each other no more. Indeed, am I not really a dead man, as far as intellect and honour are concerned?"

"And you can think this, and yet not have the strength . . ."

"No; I've the courage to say it, but I can only live my Bohemian life. I cannot attempt to escape from the necessity."

"And, since you force me to change the conversation, you really intend to fight Balkens?"

"Not a doubt about it."

"Because there was not enough sugar, or two or three drops of tea wanting in your punch?"

"Is the offence not serious enough?" Montussan replied with a smile.

"And when you have wounded him, you will have to tell everybody that it was simply because he offered you

a drink that was too strong for you. A fine reason for killing a painter who might some day produce a masterpiece !”

“He ? Never !”

“Why ? don’t you now and then ?”

“True,” returned Montussan, as though struck by this idea. “But since the suggestion that one might deteriorate your Balkens appears to grieve you, we’ll talk over the matter this evening. Just now let’s dine. I’m thirsty.”

Later in the evening the two friends were chatting in a café of the Place Pigalle. Balkens’ seconds had had a conference with Riaux, who had received full powers from Montussan. The Bohemian appeared very willing to let the matter rest, though nothing had been arranged that night.

“Why is not the business concluded ?” he asked. “He can only either fight or apologise.”

“He will not apologise, and perhaps he will not fight.”

“What do you understand by that ?”

“You’ll know to-morrow if Balkens accepts the propositions which I have instructed his seconds to make.”

“Why do not they come back to-night ?”

“Because Balkens may be engaged ; and besides . . .”

“Hold your tongue,” exclaimed Montussan abruptly, laying his nervous hands on his companion’s arm.

“What is the matter with you ?” demanded Riaux.

“Hold your tongue, I tell you.”

“At least let me finish what I was saying.”

“Who cares about that ?”

“What has happened then ?”

"Did you see the man who has just come in, and has sat down over yonder? Look cautiously, please."

"Do you know him?" Riaux asked in surprise.

"I want to know whether you noticed him, examined him when he opened the door?"

"No."

"That's a pity. It was worth seeing. He turned the handle rapidly, and appeared suddenly, his face a sinister white."

"He has had too much to drink," suggested Riaux, not intensely interested.

"No; for he walked with a firm step. Only, directly he was inside, he took off his big felt wideawake, that hid a weatherbeaten face and singularly daring eyes, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand."

"Well," remarked Riaux, "he must have run pretty hard to perspire in this weather; it is suggestive of three overcoats."

"Do you see him sitting there now? He's not at his best so, for he has the height and the shoulders of a Hercules."

"Well, what of that?"

"I suspect that man."

"Of what?"

"Of everything; and as I did not know how to spend the evening, I'm delighted he's here. I shall follow him."

"Going in for the detective business?"

"No; going in for art, simply. I shall see where he goes; and maybe I shall be lucky enough to hit on some intrigue that I could give to Nassy the novelist."

"You're mad."

"Nonsense! I'm not mistaken, you may be sure. If you had only seen how, in spite of his resolute air, he advanced towards the isolated table there, with the soft and wily movement of a fellow who's quite aware of the value of caution!"

"My poor Montussan, your imagination's running riot."

"Do not believe it. He had an astounding look as he came in. I wager that he saw every soul in the place at a glance."

"You'll prove that he has an eye in his back in a moment."

"Will you bet that he does not order a glass of brandy?"

"You have taken two, and you're not a malefactor."

"I assure you, I'm not mistaken. That fellow has committed, or is going to commit, a crime."

Riaux was studying the stranger attentively. He could not restrain a gesture of surprise. The stranger had taken up delicately the little glass of brandy with which he had been served, amused himself watching it sparkle in the light, and then rapidly, with a sudden, quick jerk, tossed the whole down his throat.

"Bravo!" said Montussan, with admiration.

The unknown, meanwhile, had called the waiter, and, pointing to his glass, said in a hoarse voice—

"Another!"

In a minute he was obeyed, and the second dram followed the first, without any preliminary coquetting.

"Another!" the sombre toper ordered.

"You see, you see!" exclaimed Montussan, with a burst of childish joy.

"He was thirsty, like you, of course; nothing more."

"But look at the low and bony forehead; the threatening chin, like a bulldog's, and the eyebrows, regular bushes, that move and speak, in spite of him."

"I said that you were a poet."

"There's a problem about that man, something out of the common that fascinates me, and that I'll find out, I give you my word."

The man knocked roughly on the table, as a call to the waiter.

"He'll drink the whole bottle, you'll see."

The waiter was standing before his sinister customer like a note of interrogation.

"I've had enough of your thimbles; give me a small decanter full, and take what's owing," and he threw a twenty-franc piece on the table.

"He pays in gold. A juge d'instruction or a detective would have no more doubts than I have."

"You're ridiculous, upon my word," grumbled Riaux.

The waiter brought the decanter, and, unasked, a large glass.

"Good! you're no fool, I see," said the stranger.

"Now give me pens and ink."

"Bravo! he has a certain amount of instruction. I always maintained that instruction was by no means a preventive of crime. Education, yes; mere instruction, no."

"Are you going to pretend that that man's a scholar because he can scribble an ill-spelt letter or two?"

"It may be ill-spelt, but at any rate he knows what he wants to say. Observe how rapidly his hand runs along the paper, while those famous eyebrows of his look as if they were dancing a jig to amuse his ears."

"Yes, he certainly does not seem to hesitate."

At the moment when Riaux concluded his sentence the stranger stopped short, put the end of his penholder to his mouth, and appeared to reflect for a moment.

"The villain has a delicate hand!"

"And the nails are well cared for. It's an extraordinary character, after all," added the painter, "and I begin to understand the interest which you take in the mystery."

"And then the fun of it! I adore gambling, you know."

"Ay! my poor Montussan; that's another of your passions."

"Nature's been generous to me in that way, at any rate," said the Bohemian, laughing. "But do not get sentimental. I'm a gambler, I say. Well, I cannot imagine any game more interesting than following this man, incurring some peril if need be, to find out who he is, where he is going, and to discover the dark business for which he is probably preparing himself by hard drinking."

Without seeing that he was observed, the dram-drinker re-read his letter, and was about to put it in an envelope, when his brows contracted suddenly, and his lips tightened. Then, with a rapid and unforeseen movement, he tore the letter up and put the pieces in his pocket.

"Ah, ah!" said Montussan, triumphant, and dropping his voice; "do you mean to say this is not evidence? Why does he not throw his love-letter away? Because the pieces might be collected and the whole read."

Riaux was silent. He felt that intense curiosity was gaining him as well.

"It's wonderfully interesting," Montussan declared peremptorily.

"Look out! he's rising, he's going!" exclaimed the painter; "we're going to follow him, eh?"

"Ah, ah! you're acquiring a taste for the hunt, old fellow. Of course we're going to follow him, if needs be, to the deuce!"

"Perhaps he's going there."

"Then we shall know where it is."

With a regular but somewhat nervous stride, the stranger walked to the door. The two friends paid for their refreshment and left a moment after him. As soon as he was in the street, Montussan peered in every direction and said to his friend—

"There he is, bolting yonder. Quick! we'll get right into that individual's life without his suspecting it, and perhaps we have got hold of the prologue of a drama. Quick."

The two painters started with a rapid stride.

II.

THE stranger made his way along the external boulevard.

"If we remain some distance behind him," suggested Montussan, "we shall be able to watch him narrowly enough, without attracting his attention."

"Ay! but at that distance we run the risk of losing him at any turning."

"Have no fear. Besides, you must know that if the man is bound on a criminal errand he will turn to the right."

Riaux could not restrain his laughter.

"You do not believe it? My theory is the result of long and deep observation. There! what did I tell you? He turns down the Rue des Martyrs and goes towards Notre Dame de Lorette."

"Then, according to you, he must turn into the Rue Saint-Lazare?"

"Or the Rue Clausel, or the Rue de Châteaudun."

Riaux continued to laugh at the idea that the mere fact of his crime could compel the criminal to take one side in preference to another.

"His pace is slower," remarked the Bohemian. "Depend upon it he is going to an appointment made by his accomplices, and he is before his time."

"What is to be his part in the crime?" demanded Riaux, intensely amused by Montussan's air of authority in deciding the question.

"The active part."

"The part of brute force, you mean?"

"Yes, and no. I think that he's more intelligent than he looks; and though he may exert his muscles more often than his wits, he must be a shrewd adviser. Only he should always lean towards violent means."

"He's really taking the Rue Saint-Lazare," said Riaux.

"Here we must take care not to show ourselves in the gaslight."

"He's stopping."

"Ay! and looks as if he were taking counsel with himself."

"Ah! he has gone into the wine-shop at the corner of the Rue Taitbout."

"The thing is to know what he's doing there," said Montussan. And gliding in the shadow of the houses, he gained a point whence he could see the unknown order and imbibe his eternal glass of brandy. Riaux followed his friend, in whose ear he whispered—

"He looks as if he were writing something with a pencil on the marble table."

"That is what he is doing."

"And now he's off."

"Let him go; we'll find out what he has written."

The man left the shop alone, and walked slowly up the Rue Taitbout towards the Boulevards. Montussan

and Riaux crossed the road and entered the wine-shop by a second door. There they were thunderstruck to see, sitting at the table which their man had just left, an unprepossessing individual, who surveyed them carelessly the while he calmly rubbed out the writing on the table with his broad thumb. Riaux's consternation was almost depicted on his face ; but Montussan looked at the clock which every wine-shopkeeper has always above his counter, and said—

“Ten minutes to twelve. Only just time to catch our train.”

And he drew his comrade away before he had time to make any compromising remark.

“We must hurry,” he said, directly they were in the street. “Our man has got ahead. We must run if necessary ; and let us be on our guard against the gentleman who took us aback just now.”

“He dropped from the skies.”

“I do not know ; but he was not in the wine-shop a moment before.”

“Did you notice how he was effacing the writing which the other had left?”

“It was an appointment. I'd bet my head that we shall see them meet and attempt something in an hour.”

“Meanwhile there is our man yonder, entering the Rue du Helder.”

“Always to the right, you see,” said Montussan with an air of conviction.

“He is going to cross the Boulevard.”

"Of course; and just notice how well chosen the point is. The one street at the corner of which there is no café, and not too many lamps."

"Will he choose the Rue de la Michodière?"

"No; the Café du Helder throws too much light on the pavement near there. He'll turn to the right once more, and then we shall see. I dare not predict anything further."

When they reached the Boulevard, the stranger whom they were stalking made for the kerbstone in order to cross the road. A clock struck somewhere.

"Midnight," said Riaux, "the hour of crime."

"Crime is of all hours in Paris," returned Montussan.

It was the moment when the theatres disgorge their audiences. We all know how perilous the passage of the Boulevards is at that hour, when every driver whips up his steed with unaccustomed vigour, and the carriage lamps half blind one, darting out of the surrounding darkness. The stranger, however, left the pavement with a sure step, and without hesitation slid between the numerous vehicles that are always entangled at that point, thanks to the proximity of the Vaudeville and the Opera.

"He's a confirmed night-bird, you can see," said Montussan, who himself hesitated no more than the supposed bandit, and had soon accomplished the difficult middle passage, with Riaux at his heels.

"His way is through the Rue Louis le Grand."

"Yes; but now, my dear fellow, a word. I do not want you to be victimised by my love of mystery, of the

unknown. It is perhaps out of friendship for me that you have joined in the chase we are pursuing."

"What do you mean?"

"If it is likely to tire you or bore you, go home."

"Let you go on alone with an adventure that may land you in all kinds of difficulties, with your headstrong nature: never."

"Do not be afraid for me: this is not my first expedition of the kind."

"But I'm going to remain with you for several reasons. The first is, that I am intensely interested in the business."

"That's the best reason."

"And I feel quite disposed to walk about all night."

"Which is probably what we shall have to do."

By this time the unknown had reached the Place Vendôme. The two friends allowed him to traverse the square without showing themselves.

"If I'm not mistaken we need not be anxious about him now. I'll bet Balkens' head—what infernal punch the fellow does give one!—that our friend will proceed by the Rue de Rivoli and the Place de la Concorde."

"And afterwards?"

"Who knows . . . Vaugirard, Grenelle, may be. We shall be lucky if he doesn't draw us into some den of thieves beyond the fortifications."

The perspective was manifestly not to Riaux's taste; but, though he pulled a wry face, his step was steady and assured.

Montussan was not mistaken. The man crossed the

Place de la Concorde bridge, and turned to the right to wards the esplanade of the Invalides.

"Then we shall not go to Grenelle, in any case," said Montussan.

"Ay! but in this direction, towards Montparnasse, there are some very decent sinks of iniquity, I believe."

"Oh, that's an exaggeration; it's a very respectable quarter," returned Montussan in the tone of an explorer who knew all about it.

"Well, he does not stop; we're on the road to Montparnasse. It's more than one o'clock in the morning, and I do not see . . ."

"One of two things," interrupted Montussan. "Either he has discovered us, and is leading us a wild goose chase . . ."

"I rather incline towards that explanation."

"Or else he has time to lose, and is going to his appointment by the longest route."

"Here we are at Montparnasse station. If he continue his promenade, I shall drop him."

"Disheartened already?"

"Wait; he is trying to discover his whereabouts."

"He is going down the Rue de Rennes. Let us after him."

"It would be absurd if he brought us back to Montmartre."

"If he does, it must be by a very zigzag way," said Montussan. "Here we are in the Rue Vaugirard."

"And I've just felt a big drop of rain on my hand."

"It won't be much; it's too cold," remarked the Bohemian, who would not give up his purpose.

Thus they reached the Luxembourg, then the Odéon. It was two o'clock in the morning. The mysterious noctambulist took his way down the Boulevard St. Michel.

"This time he has turned to the left," said Riaux with a smile.

"Of course he must, now and then. Otherwise he would be perpetually moving in a series of concentric circles, which might be monotonous in the long-run."

Ahead the saturnine stranger began to walk rapidly and with decided gait.

"It is the witching hour," Montussan remarked. "To the left again, Boulevard St. Germain."

At this epoch the Boulevard had not been completed. It stopped short at a narrow street, the Rue Haute-feuille, into which the object of Montussan's suspicions turned, but not before, by a low whistle, he had made his presence known.

"Here's the crisis," the Bohemian whispered.

An exactly similar sound was heard, and a figure advanced from a recess between two houses. The accomplices—for that in all likelihood they were—exchanged not a word, but side by side walked up the street until a narrower one, the Rue Jardinot, was attained. Here pursuit was more difficult; but Montussan persisted, saying that the rarity of the street-lamps was a guarantee of safety, even though they should walk on the heels of

their quarry. The men strode sturdily up the tortuous gully, and appeared within the light of one lamp.

"Now," said Montussan, "they are in the shadow and beside a blank garden-wall. If they cross the road, we shall see them; if they continue here, they must appear under the next lamp."

They paused a moment. Then the Bohemian exclaimed—

"What the deuce can they be doing? Have the fellows climbed the wall?"

And darting forward, he was just in time to see one of the men, astride the wall for a moment, disappear into the garden on the opposite side. Montussan remained aghast and gazing vacantly.

"That's it, of course," he said at last. "One of them has lent his shoulders for the purpose of the escalade, and the other rascal helped him up with his hands."

"Well, your game's run to earth, Montussan; a pleasant result, doing all those miles to tumble against this infernal wall at the end. Let us get home to bed."

"Wait a moment and come over here," answered Montussan, pushing his friend to the foot of the wall. "You're a man of muscle; let me get on your shoulders and have a look over the wall!"

"And what will be the use of that?"

"I may see what they are about."

Grumbling somewhat, Riaux fell in with the suggestion at last.

Montussan a minute afterwards was straining his eyes in search of the housebreakers, whoever they were.

"Well?" his pedestal said interrogatively.

"Hush! Keep quiet," Montussan replied.

The words were hardly pronounced when a noise of hurrying footsteps was heard at the end of the street.

"Here! here! We have got them!" came breathlessly from several throats; and four men threw themselves upon the friends with such vigour that Montussan was near to falling from his observatory.

III.

BEFORE they could recover from the effects of the first assault, the two explorers were seized by the collar, shaken, thrown to the ground, picked up again, and generally maltreated. Their astonishment did not diminish when they perceived who their assailants were. The breakers of the peace were the functionaries charged with its preservation—policemen. While tracking the mysterious strangers, Montussan and Riaux had themselves been tracked.

"Ha! nicked in the act," said the sergeant. "Better give the job up and come along with us."

"I am hanged if they do not take us for burglars," muttered Riaux, who was beginning to find the adventure unentertaining.

"It looks like it," the policeman observed; "breaking into inhabited premises at night. Your business is settled."

"Gently, there," said Montussan suddenly.

"Ay!" returned a constable, "I daresay we ought to put on our white kid-gloves for the handling of the precious innocents."

"Clap on the handcuffs," the sergeant ordered.

At this Montussan broke into ringing laughter.

"This is splendid!" he exclaimed.

"What is that one saying?" the officer demanded.

"This is the kind of fun you like, eh?" said Riaux, considerably disconcerted.

"Certainly," returned his companion; "I call it a piece of wonderful luck."

The policemen were about to handcuff them. Riaux expostulated.

"Can you not see that there's no necessity? Take us before the Commissary of Police; he'll set us at liberty immediately; for if you think we are thieves you are grossly mistaken."

"You do not say so?"

"Let the sergeant have his way, Riaux."

"Well, then, who are you?" the sergeant demanded, somewhat surprised at the manner and language of his prisoners.

"A couple of idiots who ought to have been in bed long ago," was the painter's reply.

"The beggars are making fools of us!" the exasperated sergeant exclaimed. "Come along there, and quietly too."

"We're quiet enough," said Montussan. "For my part, I am delighted that you came in time to arrest us. I shall feel eternally grateful to you, sergeant."

"Ah! you're a wag, I see."

"And sincere. Just listen to me. You're going to make an absurd mistake."

"I'll risk it."

"A mistake that may cost you tremendously dear,"

Montussan added so seriously that the sergeant hesitated for a moment.

"You're trying to mystify us," he said.

"Take care," Montussan went on, "that while you drag two innocent men to the station, some desperate crime is not committed there, in that garden."

"A crime!" the sergeant echoed.

"Ay! You took us for a couple of desperadoes. Well, the real villain was before us; we have followed him from Montmartre by the most unfrequented streets which he could find. He left word for a friend on a wine-shop table of the Rue Taitbout, and his accomplice joined him a few minutes ago in the Rue Hautefeuille. You see that our information is precise. We followed the two into this street, and they have just got over the wall against which we are standing."

"But what were you doing on your friend's shoulders?"

"Trying to see what they were doing in the garden."

"What are your names and positions?"

"My name is Lucien Montussan; I've no profession. My friend's name is Riaux; he is an artist and a Knight of the Legion of Honour."

The policemen saluted.

"You'll allow," said the sergeant, "that it's an odd occupation for a Knight of the Legion to be helping men over garden walls at three o'clock in the morning."

"And then, sergeant," a constable suggested in low tones, "is it quite sure that the gentlemen are what they say?"

"What was your object in following the two men?" the sergeant asked, after a moment's reflection.

"I thought it would give us a good idea for a novel," Montussan returned complacently.

The policemen tittered, and one was heard to grumble that that chap seemed to think they were bigger fools than they looked.

"Come, step out, there," their chief said angrily. "You can explain all that to the Commissary."

"Let us go," said Riaux; "what is the use of protesting?"

"But do you not see," the Bohemian exclaimed, "that only the police can claim a right to enter a house at this hour; and that our only chance of finding out our burglars' errand is to get with them into the garden?" Then, turning to the sergeant, he added, "You must know the door of the house to which this garden belongs? Then why should you not wake up the porter and search the house? You need not let us go for that."

"Yes; and while we are inside looking, the burglars, who may be in league with you, will re climb the wall and get off."

"Well, you're not sharp, my man," said Montussan.

"I say, you keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Is it so very difficult to put two or three men on guard at the ends of the wall and cut off our friends' retreat?"

"After all," returned the sergeant, after a moment's reflection, and turning towards his men, "what do we risk? Keep firm hold of these two birds in the hand, and if they turn the least bit restive, the bracelets."

Two policemen happened to pass in the Rue Haute-feuille. They were called, and stationed according to Montussan's suggestion. Then the little troop containing the prisoners made for the house to which the garden appertained. In two or three minutes they were before an old, low, pot-bellied door with a wide archway, of a pattern familiar in French provincial towns, and not unfrequent in the Faubourg St Germain. The sergeant rang a long peal and waited ; but apparently the porter was not accustomed to be awakened at that unseasonable hour.

"May be the concierge is an accomplice," suggested the sergeant.

"No," said Montussan ; "in that case the men would have got in at the door and not over the garden wall."

The policemen were about to batter at the door with their sword-hilts, when a voice was heard within.

"Who is it ? What do you want ?"

"Open !" was all the sergeant could say, the official 'In the name of the law' being only used by the bearers of a warrant.

"It is the police," added Montussan ; "for your own sake, open."

"Mercy on us ! the police ! for my own sake," the voice exclaimed, and in a moment the door was drawn back a few inches.

The uniforms were reassuring, and the door opened wide before them. The porter stood shivering in his shirt, his feet in slippers.

"Here are two—two," the sergeant began, hesitating as to the proper designation of his prisoners.

"Two noctambulists," suggested Montussan.

"Two night-prowlers, rather."

"It is the same thing."

"Well," went on the sergeant impatiently, "here are two gentlemen . . ."

"That's it !"

"Who say they have seen two thieves get into the premises by the wall of the Rue Jardinot."

"Into our garden !" exclaimed the porter, aghast. "Murderers, perhaps !"

"We want you to show us over the place, so that we may ascertain whether there is any truth in the story."

"Certainly ! I'll put on my trousers and be with you."

He went into his lodge and lit a candle. He was a little man, prodigiously broad, swollen in face, bust, and stomach. His body formed an almost perfect square, supported by little spindle-legs ; his arms were so long that they suggested the usual accompaniment of such abnormal limbs—a hump. Little grey eyes glittered under a big overhanging brow ; but they were his only feature that had not attained a more than respectable magnitude. His mouth was a formidable slit ; his nose spread lavishly ; his ears were not unlike young cabbage leaves ; and withal the face, though strongly pock-marked, had a general air of candour and kindliness.

"I have two lanterns with strong reflectors," he said ; "shall I light them ?"

"Of course," said Montussan, who appeared to be in command of the investigation; "we need not be afraid of scaring them since every issue is guarded."

Five minutes afterwards the cortège entered the garden under the guidance of the concierge, who carried the lanterns. They proceeded at first towards the spot where the housebreakers had climbed the wall.

"This way, gentlemen; to the right of the cottage," said the porter.

"Does anybody live here?" Montussan inquired.

"Yes, sir; a gentleman of independent property, M. Largeval, who is the best tenant that ever was."

"That means generous, of course?" said Montussan.

"Well, gentlemen," said the concierge, without answering Lucien, "there is the place you mean."

"You are right!" said Montussan, taking one of the lanterns. "Look here, sergeant! There are some shrubs broken, the ground is trodden, and distinct marks of footsteps are in the damp earth."

"And," put in the porter, "they lead straight to the cottage."

"Here there is a halt. Porter, lower your light," said the sergeant.

"That was probably caused by the noise which you made in arresting us. If they knew what was happening they must have laughed consummately. Here they continue their way to the cottage."

"And here the traces disappear," observed the sergeant.

"Not a bit," returned Montussan, stooping with his

lantern ; they have only passed on to the asphalt walk that surrounds the cottage. The footprints are less distinct, but still it is easy enough to follow them."

"Ay!" said one of the policemen, "here are marks of the earth that was sticking to their boots."

"And here are more on the steps," added Riaux.

"And they have rubbed and scraped their feet, too," said his friend, "as if they were quite sure of getting in."

"Yes," hazarded the sergeant, thoroughly dazed, "we must have disturbed them at their work. Is the door open?"

"No," a policeman said, leaning against it.

"Then they are hidden in the garden. Now we must manoeuvre with caution."

"As they withdrew from the cottage they must have left more footprints, and we have only to find out where these begin."

This conversation was carried on in whispers.

Carrying the lanterns, Montussan and the sergeant made a journey of discovery round the cottage. Bending low and lighting every inch of the way, they examined the asphalt pavement designed to protect the building from damp, and found no trace of a retreat.

"It's evident," said Montussan, "that our men went to the cottage."

"That's as clear as day," said the sergeant.

"But there is absolutely nothing to show that they left it."

"So you conclude that they're inside the cottage?"

"I don't know; but it is possible. If they had time to get in, there is nothing to prevent them from shutting the door and quietly waiting until we shall have left."

"We can soon find out whether they have done that," said the sergeant. "Porter, knock up your tenant."

And while the concierge used his fists vigorously on the cottage door, and Montussan applied himself as sturdily to the bell, the entire band vociferated—

"M. Largeval! M. Largeval!"

After several minutes of this pandemoniac chorus, a window on the first floor was opened, and, directing the rays of his lantern upwards, the porter called out—

"Is that you, M. Largeval?"

"Gracious powers, Pascalin! what is all this noise about?"

"It's all right, sir," answered Pascalin; "there is no danger. Only the police have seen a man, or rather two men . . ."

"Porter, you'll never have finished at that rate," interrupted Montussan. "Sir, would you mind coming down for five minutes?"

The tenant of the cottage muttered a few words of ill-humour, like a man whose sleep has been disturbed, and shut the window abruptly. A moment after a heavy foot was heard on the stairs and a voice asked—

"Need I open the door?"

"Yes, sir. Do not be afraid."

The persistency with which the concierge rebuked a supposed general want of courage attracted Riaux's

attention, and scanning him narrowly, the painter discovered that M. Pascalín himself was suffering from a panic terror, which he strove to disguise by dint of perpetual talk. This fear dated from the first appearance of the police, but it was growing every moment. He saw the robbers armed to the teeth and massacring the entire company in a trice. Meanwhile, apparently, formidable chains and bolts were rattling, then a key was turned twice.

"If they have got into the house, it was not through that barricade," the sergeant remarked.

M. Largeval appeared on the threshold wearing a dressing-gown, his head enveloped in the silk handkerchief that Frenchmen generally affect at night. His eyes were swollen with sleep, and he looked dazed and dull. He held a candle, which lit up a face at first sight without expression and commonplace.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"We have ascertained that two suspicious-looking men have climbed the wall into your garden."

"Thieves!" cried Largeval, in a state of veritable terror. "You see, you see, Pascalín! How often have I told you that the wall was not nearly high enough?"

"And have I not told the landlord so?" returned the unhappy porter. "If he only lived here, and had a few frights like this of to-night, he'd soon put a row of spikes on the wall."

"You can discuss that to-morrow. For the moment, we must inform this gentleman that there are distinct traces of footsteps leading up to the door of his cottage."

"And after that?"

"After that there are no further indications. The villains must have dissolved into thin air. Or else," the Bohemian added, "they are in your house."

"In my house!" cried Largeval, leaping with affright. "Come in, come in, all of you. Do not stay out there. Thieves in my house! murderers, I daresay. Now I remember that just as I was dropping off to sleep I fancied I heard footsteps in the garden paths."

"There, you see!" put in Pascalin.

"But then there are so many odd noises about the cottage, that I did not pay much attention."

"And besides, you seem to protect yourself pretty carefully as far as bolts and bars go," observed Riaux.

"But then they say that professional burglars have such a number of clever contrivances for the opening of any door, that I would not swear the wretches are not here nevertheless."

"Could they have got in by the cellars?" inquired the sergeant. To which question Largeval returned an emphatic denial.

"Or through the ground-floor shutters?"

"They are all lined with cast-iron."

"Then nobody can have got into your house," said the sergeant, "and we will wish you good-night."

"By no means, if you please," Largeval hastened to object. "I am not going to bed without being perfectly certain that there is nobody in the house likely to murder me in my bed."

"But nobody can get in!"

"No matter. I insist upon a thorough search being made."

There was no refusing this positive demand, and everybody entered the house. They visited the cellars first, where the master of the house treated the minions of the law to two or three bottles of good wine; and the health of the Government—whatever it was—and that of its family were drunk according to established custom.

"Let us see," said Montussan, when they had come back to the ground-floor, "that no shutter has been cut through."

The shutters were intact; and upstairs, and in the garret above, nothing of any moment was to be seen. The inquisitors were obliged to return with the ultimate conviction that no stranger had effected a clandestine entrance into the house.

"It is an astounding thing, all the same," remarked Montussan.

They patrolled the garden in every sense, and again and again, with the same negative result. Then bidding good-night to Pascalín, the troop prepared to withdraw.

"They have simply flown away," said Montussan, plunged in a profound reverie.

As for Riaux, he was overjoyed at the prospect of being able at last to go home and to bed. Both friends were awakened to an unpleasant reality by the sergeant, who observed abruptly—

"All that's very well; but what we have got to see now is whether these young fellows here have not been gulling us all through."

"Which young fellows?" Pascalin inquired.

"These two. We caught them just as they were getting over your wall."

The porter bounded back in alarm.

"Why, they must be escaped convicts at least," he murmured.

"Not escaped, porter, as you can see," said Montussan; "and not convicted yet."

"Well, we shall see if you will not be pretty soon," the sergeant opined severely.

The day was dawning when they reached the police-station. There they were compelled to wait for a commissary, who, arriving at last, delivered them from bondage, after a brief examination, at half-past nine in the morning.

IV.

ONCE more at liberty, the friends made for the Boulevard Saint-Michel in search of a cab to convey them home. Montussan was still disposed to speculate on the origin of their adventure.

"The more I think about it the more surprised I am that we did not lay hands on the rascals."

"Those rascals, as you call them, have kept me up all night, and made me spend a particularly disagreeable morning. Let them hang or not, I don't care."

"You have no enthusiasm."

"Not when I'm three-quarters asleep."

"Pooh! I should not mind watching the house all day rather than come home beaten. And then I have a kind of presentiment that that Largeval knew more about it than he appeared to know."

"Bosh! why, the poor wretch was ill with fear."

"A good deal too ill; that's what aroused my suspicion."

As he pronounced the words, Montussan's attention was attracted by a young girl of rare beauty, who, with a bright flush on her cheek, was inclining her head in answer to the salute of a youth passing on the opposite pavement.

"The last grisette," said Montussan, nodding towards the girl.

"And a pretty one, poor child!"

"I say, Riaux, look at the supplicating air of the lover going towards her with outstretched hand."

"True! what a delicious little sketch one could make of that!"

"Ah! she cannot resist the lucky young dog; she has given her hand."

"And he—he runs away with his joy like a thief. Good heavens, Montussan!"

There was a ringing scream. Crossing the boulevard, the young man had been thrown down by an omnibus team, and was lying prone in the roadway. It had happened in the space of an instant. Full of his love and his happiness, the young fellow had plunged forward recklessly, the clasp of his idol's hand yet on his. Caught violently by the shaft, he was hurled to the ground head foremost, and then rang out the scream of agony that had startled Riaux and Montussan. They turned, and were nearly stunned by the spectacle that met their gaze.

The girl, who was tall, but slight and delicate of figure, had flown instinctively to the horses' heads, and was pulling at them with all the little strength of her slender wrists. Tugging at the reins, the coachman threw a formidable oath at her; but she heard nothing, saw nothing, save the man at the plunging horses' feet, whom every second brought nearer to ghastly death. Montussan saw it all as though in a dream, and then

he found himself under the horses' heads beside the young girl.

With a firmer hand than many would have believed the incorrigible toper to possess, he held back the two animals, and slowly turning the omnibus round, saved young girl and lover.

But, unhappily, he had not been able to preserve the girl from all hurt. The pole of the omnibus had struck her sharply on the shoulder, and she had fallen to the ground fainting. Carried by the bystanders into a chemist's shop, she soon recovered sufficiently to utter one word—

"Gaston?"

"Gaston is safe too, Mademoiselle," Montussan hastened to declare, his eyes still resting, charmed, on the girl's winsome face.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"There, in the laboratory."

"Why is he not here? Is he—is he so seriously hurt?"

"No; he has fainted; but it has been ascertained that he is not dangerously wounded."

"I daresay the same thing cannot be said for you, Mademoiselle," said Riaux, advancing. "Are you not in pain?"

"My shoulder hurts me a little," she said.

The doctor had arrived on the spot, and announced that her shoulder was dislocated. At this moment Gaston, who had really escaped scatheless, entered and saw her pale and lying down.

"Geneviève!" he exclaimed, and ran towards her. "What has happened? How do you come here? Ah! of course . . . It was the emotion, the fear which made you faint."

"Yes," she said simply, with a radiant smile.

Montussan whispered in the young man's ear—

"Ah! sir, your whole life will not be enough to repay Mademoiselle Geneviève for to-day."

And in a few words he described the girl's heroic conduct.

"Love her well," he added, "love her unto death; you will never love her as she loves you. It is I who say so, and I know what I am saying."

"Who are you?" the young man asked, surprised by the tone and the words.

"A man," the chemist answered, "who has just saved your life and that of the young lady here."

"Oh, come now!", expostulated Montussan. "You leave me alone. I have done nothing at all."

"You have, you have!" put in Geneviève. "I saw you, when the horses were just about to trample me down, I saw you seize the reins and turn their heads away with wonderful strength; and I thank you, sir."

And holding out her hand, she added simply, but in a voice that meant much—

"I thank you."

Gaston looked hard and enviously at the Bohemian holding the girl's slender fingers in his. Montussan laughingly whispered—

"He's jealous! Give him the other and forgive him."

"I cannot," she returned, trying to raise her arm and failing.

"Well, give him this one," said Montussan, placing the hand which he held in that of the young man. "But you must be very much hurt?"

"No; my shoulder feels numbed, that's all."

In answer to the doctor's question, she said she lived in the Rue Racine, quite near. She could walk, and bravely she rose up to prove the assertion.

"Well," the doctor said, "you must go home as quickly as possible and have the shoulder set."

"Shall I be long ill?"

"Some time; but after the first operation you will feel little pain."

"Shall we send for a cab?" the doctor inquired, and as Geneviève positively refused, he added, "Well, take the arm of one of these gentlemen."

Gaston, naturally enough, pressed forward; but thinking perhaps that in one day she had given him enough open proofs of love, the young girl turned to Montussan—

"You will see me home, will you not, sir? It will be another debt which I'll owe you."

"You owe me nothing, my dear young lady. There was not the slightest merit in what I did this morning. Ah! if I had only known you before, I might have acted from other motives, and have been glad to be your creditor."

Blushing, she laid her hand upon his arm. But ere they left the shop she turned towards Gaston, smiled, and said, "Good-bye, Gaston;" and the smile and the

voice brought a light of gladness to the young man's brow. Then in answer to his fervent wish of seeing her soon again, she added mischievously—

“And mind the crossings.”

She walked between Montussan, on whose arm she leant, and Riaux, who guarded her injured shoulder from the contact of the passers-by. Seeing that Gaston was about to follow them, she turned her head and said, almost aloud, in the simplicity of her innocence—

“No, Gaston, pray. If you want us to succeed, leave it all to me.”

“It will be so long before I see you again!”

“That's a small matter. But go. If papa left his office a little earlier and saw you, we might never meet again.”

“And now,” she said, turning to Montussan, while Gaston slowly withdrew, “now, sir, will you tell me your name?”

“Why?”

“To know it, to tell it to my father and mother. Ah! how they will like you! And if you will not tell me, I'll ask your friend.”

“His name is Lucien Montussan, Mademoiselle,” Riaux responded immediately; “the best, the kindest of fellows . . .”

“Oh, no panegyric, Riaux!”

With the candid curiosity of her age she proceeded—

“And your profession, sir? You must have something else to do than go about rescuing young men and girls.”

"That's where you are mistaken ; it is my only pursuit."

This time, when Geneviève looked interrogatively at Riaux, he felt that he could answer nothing, and remained silent.

"My shoulder is beginning to hurt again," she said uncomplainingly after a moment ; "but I should not like to reach home before asking you one thing."

"It shall be granted, be sure," Montussan returned, impressed by the child's ingenuous frankness.

"Well, if mamma should question you about the cause of the accident . . ."

"Don't mention M. Gaston, eh ?"

"That's it ! I will tell her the truth later. Now . . . now it would vex her to hear that I had stopped and spoken to him in the street."

"We will be prudence itself, Mademoiselle. And if your father asks for particulars . . ."

"Oh, papa is at his office ! He goes there at half-past seven, and only returns for luncheon at eleven. Here is the house. We live on the fourth floor. Shall I be able to climb as far, I wonder ?"

"Lean well on my arm," said Lucien.

"I think you are kind," Geneviève murmured ; "your friend is right."

"My friend told a falsehood. I'm not at all kind. I'm good for nothing. My life is useless. But why should I tell you all that ?"

"You look disheartened. Something has gone amiss with you. But it will all come right in the end. Believe me, I bring good-luck."

"Look here, Mademoiselle," said Lucien abruptly, "I advise you to be considerably less good-natured, or I stop here."

Geneviève's big eyes looked blank astonishment at Montussan. But they had reached the fourth floor, and in a moment a woman yet young had opened the door in answer to their ring. Seeing her daughter pale and supported by two strangers, she threw herself forward, crying—

"What is it? Are you hurt, Geneviève?"

"It's nothing, nothing, mamma."

"Only a clumsy omnibus-driver, Madam, who nearly . . ."

"Killed her—killed my daughter!"

"The pole struck her to the earth, but the worst, luckily, is a simple dislocation of the shoulder."

"Dislocation of the shoulder!" repeated the poor mother in an agony.

"Be calm, Madam." The injury is not serious. A little pain while the shoulder is being set, and that will be all."

They had entered the apartment and assisted Geneviève to a couch.

"What this gentleman has not told you, mother, is that he saved my life, flying at the horses' heads, and forcing them to turn aside with such presence of mind and courage . . ."

"Mademoiselle makes too much of a . . ."

"Don't depreciate your noble act, sir," said the mother.

A ring at the bell interrupted them.

"Who can it be so early?" said Geneviève.

Her mother, who had opened the door, was heard exclaiming—

"You, George! how early you are!"

"My father!" cried Geneviève.

"You have heard of the accident?"

"Accident! what accident?" a man's voice returned.

"Oh, how pale you are, George! Geneviève doesn't look nearly as ill as you."

The door was half open, and seeing two strangers, the father entered. Montussan and Riaux arose, startled and wondering. Ere they could master themselves, the same exclamation had left their lips—

"M. Largeval!"

V.

ON his side the newcomer manifested some surprise on hearing his name pronounced. Advancing towards the two friends, he spoke in a tone of perfectly unembarrassed tranquillity—

“You seem to know me, gentlemen?”

Thus interrogated, Montussan jumped at a Parisian's natural conclusion, viz., that Largeval had two distinct homes, and very good reasons for concealing the fact from his wife and daughter. Therefore he immediately answered with the ready tact of natural good-breeding—

“I learnt your name by an accident not worth describing. A matter of graver moment is that your daughter has been injured by . . .”

“Geneviève!” Largeval exclaimed in a voice of poignant anxiety. “What was it, my poor child?”

“Oh, it's nothing, nothing, father! In a fortnight I shall be as well as ever.”

But he would not be comforted.

“Just this, just this was wanting,” he murmured.

“One of these gentlemen,” his wife said, “saved the child from death.”

"You, sir?" he asked, turning to Riaux.

"No; my friend Montussan," returned the painter.

"Oh, sir, how can I thank you save in mere words!"

"What do you mean, sir?" said Montussan, with some hauteur.

"Oh, nothing at which you could take offence! And my poor Geneviève will be ill for weeks—there will be doctors, medicines . . ."

Pascalín had informed the two friends that Largeval was possessed of independent means. They could make nothing of this last exclamation.

"Why were you so pale, since you knew nothing?" the wife asked anxiously.

"Oh, I had no positive reason! But there seemed to be a vague rumour of evil about, and I was . . . I was anxious," Largeval explained, in a fashion that rendered the explanation almost incredible.

Riaux felt that some secret was weighing on the humble home, and he rose to bid good-bye. But Largeval would not hear of their departure. He appeared to cling to them feverishly, as though their presence put off for a while some dreaded, some inevitable moment.

"Pray give us a few more minutes, gentlemen; I have not thanked you half enough. And then I want to know how it was my poor girl was in peril—all about the accident, in fact, and only you can tell me that. It is a dreadful catastrophe."

Catastrophe was certainly an exaggerated description of the misadventure. It increased the two friends' perplexity.

"You must put her to bed at once, Laurence," the father went on, "before the arm stiffens, and then send for a doctor."

"If you do not mind," Riaux interrupted, "I have a friend quite close at hand, a very clever surgeon. Will you allow me to introduce him to you?"

Largeval understood the meaning of the offer, and reddening and stammering, answered—

"I do not know—you are very kind . . ."

"I'll be back with him in ten minutes," said Riaux, hurrying away, while the father murmured shamefaced thanks.

"There's not a penny in the house," was Montussan's thought.

Madam Largeval had left the room with her daughter, but before going Geneviève said to her preserver—

"You must come and see how I get on, sir."

Which the Bohemian said he would do with infinite pleasure, if M. Largeval would allow him.

Alone with M. Largeval, Montussan imagined that it was no longer necessary to dissemble, and he began, easily—

"Now we are alone, perhaps you will excuse my asking you if your emotion just now had anything to do with last night's adventure? Have the fellows whom we were looking for done any serious harm?"

Largeval gazed at him with growing amazement as he spoke, examining his guest from head to foot, and evidently coming to the conclusion that his brain was decidedly damaged.

"Last night's adventure?" he echoed. "I do not understand."

"Come, M. Largeval, you must recognise me."

"Not at all. I do not know what you mean."

"My friend and I were at your house last night with the police."

"What police?" demanded Largeval, farther and farther at sea.

"My dear sir, I can quite well understand that you do not care about your other house being mentioned before your wife and daughter. But hang it! I've shown you that I can keep a secret; and maintaining the idea that we do not know each other seems to me ridiculous, to say the least."

"Every word of this is Greek to me," returned Largeval with some asperity. "I have not the faintest idea of what you mean."

"Your name is Largeval?"

"Certainly!"

"And yet you will not recognise me!"

"Hang it!" exclaimed Largeval, "why should I conceal the fact if I did?"

"I do not know," answered Montussan, "but as I know I have not slept for about thirty hours, I'm certain that I have not been dreaming."

"Where do you think you saw me?"

"In the Rue Serpente, in a little cottage surrounded by gardens."

"Oh," exclaimed Largeval, "I see the mistake which you have made; I ought to have thought of it before."

"A mistake!"

"Yes; the person you saw last night was indeed a Largeval, but it was Remi Largeval, my twin-brother, the moneyed man of the family."

"Your brother!" Montussan exclaimed with incredulous surprise.

"Ay, sir, and if I had not been so engrossed by the events of this morning, I should have guessed your mistake at once."

"Do you mean to say that you have a brother who is a positive facsimile of yourself?"

"I do."

"You take my breath away. I am something of a painter, sir, and I could swear that there is not a line in your face that is not exactly reproduced in that of your brother."

"You are right. I do not think twins ever were more alike. The thing is ludicrous. It has happened before now that my brother, seeing my reflection in a glass, has thought it was himself, until he discovered that his gestures did not disturb the image."

"Still, if you're put side by side . . ."

"It is almost impossible to distinguish one from the other."

"Not even by the eyes?"

"Not even by the eyes. As children we were always dressed differently in order to avoid confusion."

"And as you reached middle age, one being a rich man, and the other less fortunate, if I mistake not"—Largeval merely bowed his head—"has nothing occurred to mark one brother distinctively?"

"Nothing," Largeval returned; "where and when I grew grey he became grey too; we had exactly the same wrinkles and crowsfeet together."

"By Jove, you ought to be Siamese, not French!" the Bohemian burst out.

Largeval was not over-delighted with this somewhat indiscreet joke; but he had no time to vent his displeasure, even had he felt inclined to do so. Riaux returned at that moment with his friend the surgeon. Largeval left the room with this latter, and Montussan pounced upon Riaux.

"You'll never guess it . . ."

"What?"

"Largeval, the Largeval, the lucky Largeval, the father of Geneviève . . ."

"Well?"

"Well, he is not our Largeval; he is not last night's Largeval, that is all."

"Rubbish! Who is he?"

"They're twin-brothers."

"Twin-brothers be hanged! It's an absurd story which he has concocted in order to account for his duplex domestic arrangements."

"I do not think so. But we can easily find out the

truth by going straight from here to the Rue Serpente."

A little cry of pain was heard in the inner room. The operation was over, and leaving the surgeon to arrange his patient's bandages, Largeval returned to the friends. As though to test him, and in order to satisfy Riaux, Lucien immediately began—

"Upon my word, M. Largeval, I cannot bring myself to believe that you are not the man whom we knocked up last night."

"It is the truth, however."

"Well, if I were you, do you know that I should cultivate a wen, or burn a distinctive star in the middle of my forehead."

"And why, if you please?" Largeval asked coolly.

"Because an extraordinary resemblance like yours may become dangerous now and then."

"Or useful," Riaux added significantly.

"Or useful," Montussan echoed; and then, ceremoniously taking leave, he expressed earnest hopes for Geneviève's recovery.

"Will you wait for the doctor?" inquired Largeval.

"There is no necessity for seeing him," returned Riaux.

"And, by the by, sir, do not pay him his fee to-day. He is accustomed to send in yearly accounts to all his patients."

"I should have liked to thank you better," the poor man replied; "you have saved my daughter—saved me, I may say. I had already had one misfortune this morning before my poor child's accident occurred. Had I lost her it would have killed me."

"Misfortune! Can we be of any use?"

"No! But I thank you cordially for your offer."

Then there were hearty hand-shakes, and Madam Largeval came running out to bid good-bye to the two painters. When they had left, she sank into a couch half crying.

"What a misfortune! Does it not seem as though ill-luck would follow us all our lives?"

"Ay! and, my poor Laurence, there is more misfortune still," Largeval answered. "Ill-luck is even more persistent against us than you think."

"George, what more has happened?"

"M. Roulleau, the head of the firm . . ."

"You have lost your place?"

"If it were only that, I should have been paid, at any rate."

"What is it then—what is it?" exclaimed the poor woman.

"He is bankrupt. Offices and warehouse are shut. I am adrift again, and my month's salary is gone."

Madam Largeval's only answer was a sigh of unutterable despondency.

"When I saw Geneviève, I could not tell you all before her, as she was so ill. Is it not enough to madden a man?" he cried, wringing his hands.

"And there are not twenty francs in the house."

There was a moment of despairing silence.

"I cannot complain," Largeval murmured at last. "M. Roulleau is an honest man, who'll come out of it all as poor as we are. It is my unfortunate destiny. I have

never undertaken anything that did not fail just at the moment when failure was most disastrous."

"You must see your brother, George. At any other time, at any moment less miserable than this, I should have been the last to advise this. But now . . ."

"Oh, as for my brother . . ." Largeval began, with a gesture that denoted the little confidence with which he would apply to the providence named. "Well, well, I'll see him to-night."

VI.

THAT evening George Largeval went to his brother's house at about nine o'clock.

The resemblance between the two brothers was the more extraordinary, that, as Montussan had pointed out, they had followed widely different paths of life and arrived at very different results. They were young men of twenty when a fair fortune fell to them. The inheritance amounted to a hundred and fifty thousand francs for each. Living comes easily to men so circumstanced in France. Such an income means a foot in the stirrup, the first step towards golden prosperity. One brother, Remi, threw himself head foremost into a whirlpool of pleasure; and cards, and those queens of hearts which are worse than cards, devoured his patrimony in three years. George followed his brother's example during one misspent year; then remembering suddenly the bottomless chasm to which such roads lead, he placed the remains of his fortune in a bank of sound standing. Here began his misfortunes. At the same time that his brother was ruined by a bad card at baccarat, George heard that his banker had shot himself, having only that to do after casting away every penny confided to him in fruitless speculations on the exchange. Thus

the two brothers had arrived at the same catastrophe, one by dissipation, the other by over-confident prudence. Prudent or spendthrift, men must live. George found employment as a subordinate clerk, and having barely enough for a bachelor, immediately shared an insufficiency with a wife. Poverty has always been the most successful matrimonial agent. He married Laurence Dormeau, a pretty girl, who brought him twenty thousand francs, and on the wedding-day his employer raised his salary. This was his one lucky day, albeit he had many happy days afterwards, and in time could call his own a daughter, whom he counted his supreme happiness.

Remi believed and proved that he was not made for work. He plunged in the worst depths of Parisian Bohemianism immediately after his ruin. Now and then he rose to the surface, prosperous, to the astonishment of his contemporaries, who shook his hand with the mute inquiry in their eyes—

“How does he live?”

Then for months he disappeared mysteriously. Gaming pursuits, even less honest and honourable, gave him the means of existence. And then there came a moment when he must either openly enlist in the ranks of the recognised criminal classes or make for safer hunting-grounds. He chose the latter alternative, his choice being determined by certain misdemeanours and malpractices which might have brought him into prominence in the police-courts. He saw that to disappear was the first thing necessary, to be forgotten the second. No matter where he went,

he returned, saying that he had been round the world, which possibly might have been true. There could be no doubt about the fact that he came back with something like a decent competency, an annuity of fifteen thousand francs. His money had not altered him outwardly. He was as much like his brother as ever. They were not twins, they were duplicates. Time laid its finger on both at the same time, it might almost be said at the same minute ; so much so, that Remi, noticing as he shaved that some hairs were missing or some hairs blanched, would say with a laugh—

“Poor George ! how old he is looking !”

But more astonishing than the continued resemblance was the fact that one brother had somewhere lit upon an annual subsidy. Travellers' tales are most untrustworthy when they deal with mysterious gold. Remi, however, made no mystery about his income. He was rather anxious to explain its origin than otherwise.

“Oh, it did not cost me much,” he would volunteer. “I tried every trade during my travels, and I'm afraid the trades were not all too respectable. I wish they had been ; for the one good deed I was guilty of brought me in more than the worst business I was ever in. Ay ! it was in Peru. I was at Arica, and deuced near starvation to boot, when the whole place was shaken by such an earthquake that not four houses were left standing. I had not a penny, and the earthquake did not improve the aspect of my affairs. I moved about in the ruins, doing no good to anybody, because, I am sorry to say, that's a thing I never did do. I had a hazy idea that perhaps a

few piastres would turn up somewhere, or possibly a few ounces of gold in some of the wrecked houses. But climbing over a heap of fallen rafters that regularly barricaded a street, I heard a voice calling for help. Heaven knows what good genius prompted me, but I set to work immediately clearing away the débris, until in an hour's time I came upon a poor fellow half-suffocated and partly crushed by a big beam that lay across his chest. The poor fellow was not poor at all, it turned out, but one of the local millionaires, a M. Cacerez, whom I found to be young and without near relations. He was grateful for the little service I rendered him beyond the bounds of legendary gratitude. He wanted to lend me five hundred thousand francs as a capital on which to trade in Arica. But commercial prosperity in Arica is disagreeably tempered by formidable earthquakes, to which phenomena I was never partial. So I refused the loan, but accepted a gift—an annuity of fifteen thousand francs a year. It was bought at Lima a few days after the earthquake, and the order to pay it was immediately sent to a French insurance company. There you have the whole story. I'm independent, and I'm happy; and regularly every morning I invoke blessings on the head of Cacerez and earthquakes in general. I have no trouble; I need only just let myself live now."

The story was too cynical to be doubted, and accordingly it was successful. Men began to think of emigrating to Peru when the earthquake season was on, and the odious reputation of Remi in his former and poorer presentment was almost forgotten; the one image visible

being that of a tranquil middle-aged man, who had saved something, and lived openly in that fierce light which beats upon people with money in the bank. He had been seven years at home at the date of our history, and the most censorious critic could hardly have found a word to say against his private life. The most philosophical only saw in him one of that infinite legion of honest men who are honest only because they are well to do. Largeval had been lucky enough to procure, somehow, enough to live honestly on. As to the means by which the moral end was gained, nobody thought of them. He had the esteem of his concierge, which is the best Parisian guarantee of respectability.

Such was the career of the man to whom George Largeval was about to appeal.

"I was afraid you might be out," said George timidly ;
"I have a good deal to say to you."

"Say away, George," the brother answered good-naturedly.

"Well, to begin with, I have two misfortunes to announce."

"Misfortunes that touch you?"

"Yes. Firstly, I have lost my place."

"Sacked ! Of course, the reward of virtue, sobriety, punctuality, and the rest."

"Not at all. M. Roulleau is bankrupt, and this morning the house was shut."

"Poor George ! Dame Fortune has certainly not made you her spoilt child."

"Don't laugh, Remi. This leaves me utterly without resources."

"What! You have saved nothing?"

"You know that my brother-in-law, Dormeau, died suddenly in a gaming-house a few months before your return."

"Aye! I heard something about it, and the whole affair was rather mysterious, was it not?"

"Yes. But what I wanted to tell you was that his death ruined me for the second time. You remember that my wife's money was all in her brother's hands . . ."

"Yes, everybody had the most implicit confidence in him."

"Well, he died without a penny."

"And you have not been able to put any money by."

"Think of it, Remi. I had Geneviève to bring up, and poor Laurence has been ill for four years. And now, to crown it all, my poor girl was nearly killed this morning—an omnibus threw her down . . ."

"What! Geneviève?"

"Yes; and she was only saved by a tall young fellow, whom, by the by, you ought to know quite as well as I, for he was here last night, it appears, accompanied by policemen."

A cloud came over Remi's face, and he answered with evident ill-humour—

"Yes, they came and woke me up in the middle of the night under the pretext that somebody had got into the garden. To save the niece was the least a man could do after worrying the uncle so prodigiously a few hours before."

"So—so I come . . ." George began with piteous hesitation.

"You come to borrow money, of course."

"I do," the poor clerk answered with sudden resolution.

"Much?"

"Well, you see I ought to have a month before me—the time to find another situation."

"Well, and what does a month mean?" Remi demanded, his voice getting harsher.

"There is . . . there is the expense of the doctor—and medicine now."

"How much?" the rich man reiterated, this time with positive roughness.

"How much? I should want four hundred francs," George said with desperate trembling; then, seeing that his brother was not startled by the amount, he added—"I'll pay you back fifty francs a month directly I find a place."

"Yes, yes—I understand."

"Is it so difficult to decide whether you will let me have the money or not?"

"No; but you see this is the 25th of February, and I only get my quarter's instalment on the 1st of March—seven thousand five hundred francs. I have never been so low as I am now."

"Oh, I could manage to wait—to get credit till then," said George hopefully, "if you'll only promise to lend me the money on the first."

"I do not see anything to prevent me. Come in four days, then, at five o'clock."

George breathed freely again, and a gleam of joy came to his eyes. Four hundred francs meant a month's tranquillity assured, his darling Geneviève well cared for through sickness and convalescence. With hearty gratitude in his voice he thanked his brother. Then he rose, explaining that his daughter's condition required that he should hurry home. Remi rose too, and took a lamp to light his brother out. But, having taken a few steps, he stopped short, dropped the light, and emitting a hoarse cry, fell rigidly to the ground. The descent was swift and as sudden as the fall of a building that had been undermined. George stood staring stupidly at the prostrate figure, scarcely sensible enough to wonder what the accident meant. Gathering his scattered wits in a few minutes, however, he bent over the fallen man muttering—

“It is a fainting fit—that's all!”

And lifting Remi on to a sofa, he placed his head high, loosened his cravat and collar, and opened the window to admit the cold, reviving air.

“It is strange how purple and swollen his face looks,” he remarked to himself, but as yet without any serious anxiety.

But vinegar and other restoratives proving ineffectual, a sudden intense terror seized him, and frantically shaking the inert body, he cried aloud—

“Remi! Remi!”

Remi stirred not, but stared mute with the wide-open and glazed eyes of death. Beside himself with terror, George could decide upon nothing. Should he run for

a doctor? Life, as yet preservable, might ebb away in his absence ; and with desperate persistence he continued rubbing the fainting man's brow and hands.

"Suppose—suppose he were dead!" was the final fearful thought that came to him ; and he shook as one palsied.

"A doctor, a doctor—quick!" he exclaimed, rushing to the door.

A vague and indistinct sound stopped him. It was, he fancied, the sign of returning consciousness.

"Ah! he is getting over it," he said to himself ; "it was an awful fight, though!"

By this time it was late—close upon midnight. In that empty house, in that deserted garden, the scene was irresistibly awful. Looking at his brother, George could see that the eyes were growing glassy, the lips pallid, the nose pinched at the nostrils, the thumbs bent inwards. George seized Remi by the wrist, and was about to shake him, when the contact half paralysed him.

"He's cold!" he cried, and bent his head towards the fallen man's breast.

"Nothing!" and a glass placed at his lips yielded no other result.

"Dead . . . he is dead!" George gasped. "Poor brother! poor friend!" and clenching his hands, he sank down on the couch at the dead man's feet. "Misery! perpetual misery!" he added in a moment, starting to his feet ; "the last blow strikes but me, of course! My regret for him must be embittered by the thought that his death beggars me. He must die without helping me,

at the moment when he had promised help, and help was most needed. As Remi is dead, his annuity of course ceases. There's nothing here, not enough to pay for his funeral perhaps. My poor rich brother! it would be better if I were with him!"

And then, motionless for a quarter of an hour, he fell to thinking that this sudden death of a brother, his counterpart in every line and lineament, must surely fatally threaten his own existence.

"Am I to drop at his side in a moment?" he asked himself, shuddering in spite of his hopeless words of a moment ago.

But the idea soon vanished, and he returned to more positive cares and apprehensions.

"To think that I must have inherited any money which he might have left! Prosperity would have come to us, after twenty years' hard struggle and pinching. And now I lose at the same time my brother and all hope for my wife and child."

And then, sacrilegious from motives that were perhaps pardonable, he searched the dead. The purse he found was poorly lined, containing no more than forty-three francs. But there was perhaps some small reserve fund somewhere in the house; and without exactly knowing what desecration he was perpetrating, George opened the dead man's desk and searched its inmost recesses. Then the cupboards, the presses, every drawer and every shelf. Every minute he had some wild hope of discovering the secret deposit; every minute he was disappointed.

"It is hopeless," he exclaimed; "there's a curse weighing on me. If it had all happened four days later, after Remi had drawn his quarter's allowance! It couldn't have harmed him, poor fellow, and seven thousand francs might have saved me! But no; it could not be," he added, throwing the purse down with a furious gesture. "It makes me mad to think of his good fortune—coming across that Peruvian! And if Cacerez had only given him the capital, or if Remi had suggested a reversion of the annuity, that I might have inherited . . ."

Here George Largeval stopped short, arrested in his cogitations by the vague ghost of an audacious idea. In the silence of the night, a silence which death increased and emphasised as it were, he heard his heart beating with frantic force; the pupils of his eyes dilated, and he shook himself impatiently as though he were protesting against himself. What folly! And then his glance stole, shy and shrinking, to the rigid figure on the sofa. The gloom deepened on his face; but the idea, whatever it might be, was growing in his mind—was becoming defined, palpable, terrible, with its tempting solicitations. At first he would not hearken; but back again and again came the grim temptation, imperious and fascinating. In fine, it assailed him incessantly; he could not resist arguing with himself—

"After all, there is not a soul who would know; the keenest observer in the world would not have been able to tell one from the other. The likeness might save us all." And then, after a moment's silence, "But no; it would be a crime, a theft. Whatever there might have

been between us, I could not take money and position to which I have no right."

Fluctuating again, he reflected—

"Yet nobody could discover the substitution. And have I not got the best excuse—my misery, the ill-luck that has been following at my heels all my life? If I had kept my situation I should never have thought of this."

He fell into a chair still protesting, still discussing within himself; but the protest had become feebler, and the discussion was more one-sided.

"It is a curiously fortunate thing," he reflected, "that there is nobody in the house; the servants have been discharged. If I woke up in the morning as the master, no one would remark any little breach which I might make of Remi's ordinary rules and habits."

He rose and strode nervously up and down the room, seeing a thousand difficulties and dangers in his scheme, but clinging to it nevertheless with the clutch of despair. M. Cacerez, he argued speciously, never expected Remi Largeval to die at forty-nine. He was rich; would it injure him in any way to continue the payment of the annuity for ten or twenty years longer? And finally, with sudden energy he ejaculated—

"Well, I must decide!" and striding to the sofa, he added, "If I am doing wrong, hard fate and sudden opportunity will at least be partly responsible."

Having said this, having come to a decision, he remained sombre and silent the while he executed the sinister business on which he was bent. He began by

shutting the window and carefully drawing the curtains, and then he stripped the body. A terrible task it was, one that again and again he was on the point of abandoning. The corpse seemed to rise before him, the outrage galvanising it, as it were. And it was not only repulsive, it was terribly difficult ; the limbs had stiffened, and their clothing had sometimes to be cut from them. Panting, and with terror in his eyes, the perspiration pouring from his brow, George went on with the loathsome labour, scarcely knowing what he did. An arm which he had bent sprung back and touched his face. He had almost shrieked and fled, when the thought of his wife and child came to him again, and he returned mechanically to the hideous task, which was soon completed. There remained but to effect the change of clothing. This he accomplished with shuddering repugnance, and then turned towards the mirror.

"Remi !" he exclaimed, aghast at the presentment ; but reassured by it, he added, "Now to tell Laurence."

VII.

BUT tell her what ? how much ? were the questions that naturally occurred to him after a moment's perplexity. Was he to confide in her entirely, or to play before her and his daughter the part which he had condemned himself to enact before the world ? No ; the first plan was impossible. She would never consent. He knew her well ; an upright, even a puritanical nature, she would compel him in her honest indignation to resume the old miserable life.

On the other hand, she might recognise and betray him. That, after all, must be risked. He was on a road where one can only walk forward, if not without fear, at least without hesitation. He decided, therefore, that he himself must communicate to her the news of his own death. If she recognised him, he must endeavour to enlist her on his side. If she failed to know him, that meant assured success.

Another complication was that Laurence had shown constant antipathy to her brother-in-law, and had refused for five years to enter his house or to allow Geneviève to visit him. But that was a minor difficulty, after all ; and conquering one brief impulse to forego his scheme

and return to beggary, George put on the dead man's hat and left the cottage.

It was two o'clock in the morning when he knocked at the window of Pascalin's lodge.

"Open! open, quick!" he cried. "My brother is dead . . . has died suddenly. Open!"

Rudely awakened, the concierge pulled the string that communicated with the door-latch in the befogged condition common to all persons suddenly aroused from sleep.

"That's all right!" George said to himself; "he cannot possibly guess which brother it is who spoke. When I return I shall know whether I am George or Remi Largeval."

A quarter of an hour afterwards he was ringing at his own door. Laurence, who had been awaiting him in mortal anxiety, opened immediately.

"You!" she cried, and George breathed again; he was not known.

Silent and sombre, with melancholy eyes, he entered.

"My husband?" the woman asked whom he was about to widow.

"My dear Laurence, be brave—be very brave."

"George is ill . . . hurt dangerously?"

"Hush! Geneviève's accident I have heard of—she is probably asleep."

"Ay! and with fever."

"Let her sleep; she will learn all soon enough."

"But what is all? Where is George? Why is he not with you?"

"My poor Laurence, Geneviève has no father."

"No father!" Laurence cried wildly. "George . . ."

"George is no more," said Largeval with sombre gravity.

"Oh, he has killed himself; he could not bear to see our poverty, and he has left us doubly poor!"

"My dear sister, no."

"Oh, no 'sister' from you," the woman cried vehemently; "you know I will not bear it from you. Speak the truth, if you can."

"I am trying to break sad news to you," said George, gently complaining. "Why should you treat me thus?"

And in truth he was puzzled to imagine what could render his wife so contemptuously angry.

"I wish to know the truth, sir—the truth."

"Well, poor George died suddenly to-night at my house, just as he was about to leave me."

"And you sent for no doctor?"

"I thought that it was a simple fainting fit. I did all that can be done in such cases; I was unsuccessful. When at last I was going in search of a doctor, I found that his hand was cold."

The while he spoke Laurence studied him fixedly. Largeval bore the examination with sufficient calm. Once or twice there came a light to her eyes as though she were about to make some comment that was on the tip of her tongue, but finally she constrained herself; and it was only after a moment's thought that she put the question—

"Was he ill when he came to you?" and while she spoke she was donning in feverish haste a shawl and bonnet.

"No ; but he had had so many griefs during the day."

"True ; but here, I am ready. I must see him ; take me to him. Ah ! it needed this last anguish to make me enter your doors !"

George raised his head in astonishment ; but it was only for a second. Remi would have understood her, he must show no surprise.

As he followed her downstairs into the street, Laurence was haunted by a vague wonderment. Never, she thought, had the phenomenal resemblance between the two brothers impressed her so forcibly. It seemed almost her husband that called her dear Laurence, and yet it was the hated glance of the wretch at whose mercy she and Geneviève would probably find themselves.

"Will you take my arm, Laurence ?" asked George when they reached the street.

"There is no necessity," she returned harshly, almost fiercely ; "I will walk beside you. Your presence is sufficient protection."

And then she added—

"You're not walking. Can you not feel that I'm longing to be near him ? Perhaps, perhaps," she murmured, "he is not really dead."

Largeval was silent, half happy in his wife's sorrow, but pained to witness her grief. When they arrived, M. Pascalín, forgetting that anybody had left the house, presented himself in his shirt, according to his invariable custom when strangers rang at night. Largeval took him rudely to task for his impropriety, and while her husband spoke Madam Largeval again experienced an

astonishment that she had never felt when chance brought her into the presence of Remi.

The porter's lamentations and offers of service were vigorous and voluble when the calamity in the cottage was made known to him. Largeval left him in the middle of them, and drew the impatient Laurence after him to the house that was now his, at least in name.

They entered the drawing-room together. Everything was in the state of disorder which such a calamity inevitably creates. Lying on the sofa, and dressed in George's customary clothes, Renée Largeval showed the rigid profile of death. With a gesture George indicated it, wondering whether she who had not recognised the living would recognise the dead.

But no; through the heavy tears in her eyes she saw her husband in his everyday attire, and she was satisfied. Falling beside the dead man, she took his head in her hands and covered it with tears and kisses; the sobs came fast and in uncontrollable paroxysms which nearly strangled her. George had not hardened himself against the spectacle of such grief. He felt that all spoken sympathy was vain; and yet he must do something to drag her from those frenzied embraces; they were repulsive in his eyes, albeit he knew the mockery they were.

He even bent over her to take her by the arm, perhaps to tell her the truth. But raising herself suddenly, she rebuffed him furiously with look and voice—

“Leave me! leave me, I say!”

Abashed, George dared not persist. Why should he? He knew that she would refuse all share in his plot, and

it was for her that he committed this more than doubtful action, sacrificing himself in a way, condemning himself most probably to a solitary and sorrowful life. Already it was torture to pain her—torture to be powerless to console her, and to know himself, at least for a time, a stranger, an enemy in her eyes.

Laurence had fallen into her former position. "A widow! a widow!" she repeated to herself, like a dolorous burden. Her poor George had died without kissing her, without a word of farewell. Her husband stood behind her patiently waiting until her prayers and sobs should have an end.

At last she turned and addressed him coldly—

"Let him be carried home to-morrow, sir, if you please."

"Let me do everything that is necessary, and keep your home free of it all," he returned.

"I do not understand."

"I mean that my poor brother should be carried to the grave from this house. It would be simpler so; and you would be able to spare Geneviève the agitation and the grief in her present feverish state."

"But what shall I say to her?"

"Say that George was obliged to undertake a journey at a minute's notice."

Laurence scarcely heard him, she was thinking of her wounded child, her dead husband.

"Yes, I dare say you are right," she sobbed at last, and fell again on her knees, breaking into tearful prayers.

VIII.

THROUGHOUT the next day, George, perforce, was busy with all the legal declarations, the dreary cares which the calamity of the night had cast upon him. Again and again he was brought in contact with persons who had known his brother well. Not once was his identity the subject of the vaguest doubt. Prudent Pascalín, who was busy in his service the greater part of the day, remarked nothing unwonted in him; and when night came, and for the first time he laid himself down in his brother's bed, he felt sure that his part would be as easy as possible to play.

Against all George's supplications Madam Largeval chose to follow the funeral. Strong in her maternal solicitude, she had succeeded in concealing everything from Geneviève, whose sufferings were more acute. But she felt that she must weep openly again, allow her grief free vent; and in truth, perhaps, the ceremonial mourning march was the most wholesome relief from the constraint imposed on her by her daughter's condition.

George was his own chief mourner, and the effect of his presence was prodigious on the friends and acquaintances who had come to do posthumous honour to him.

The incomprehensible similarity of the two brothers was the general and inexhaustible theme of puzzled comment. Familiar as she was with the wonder, Laurence herself could scarcely resist the impression that her living husband walked beside her.

At the cemetery George's experiences were such as it is given to few men to undergo.

His oldest friend stood forth from the group of mourners and delivered a brief eulogium of the dead. The speaker was sincere in his emotion, and it communicated itself to the greater number of those present. Laurence wept with renewed violence.

Only the real hero of it all, despite his sincere regret for his brother, only George Largeval could hardly keep himself from smiling. When he shook hands with his friend and eulogist, he was compelled to drop his eyes lest his thoughts should be seen in them.

Having left Laurence at her door, he returned to what was now home to him. Two days had elapsed since he had assumed his disguise, and no mishap had occurred. Everywhere he was accepted as Remi, yet he remained on his guard. There were many events in the life before him which his brother must have expected, and been prepared for, but which would assuredly take him by surprise.

And then there was a peculiarly difficult trial to traverse. The half-yearly instalment of his brother's annuity fell due exactly four days after Remi's death. Would the drawing of it discover his fraud? Would he come triumphantly out of that supreme ordeal?

His heart felt cramped and cold when the time came for this final imposture. He had studied the insurance company's offices the day before ; knew the position of the different departments, and exactly what it behoved him to do. So his step was steady, though he had terror in his heart, when he entered the large hall where his fate was to be decided. A messenger touched his cap to him. His forehead damp with dew, he advanced to a certain pigeon-hole, knocked gently, and showing his face, said in a hollow voice—

"An instalment of my annuity falls due to-day, and . . ."

The cashier interrupted him with a jovial—

"You are always punctual, M. Largeval."

"One must be in these days," George returned in the same tone.

"The first time I do not see you on the first of March or first of September, I may make sure that you've departed this life !"

This poor joke fell like a hammer on George's brain. He had just enough presence of mind to reply—

"Well, dead or bedridden."

On the most important point he was thoroughly satisfied ; the cashier did not dream of suspecting him. Then came the business routine.

"You have got your certificate of birth?" the clerk said.

"Yes," and George produced the document.

"Quite right, and now kindly sign that receipt."

Largeval fell back startled in spite of himself.

"What is the matter?" the cashier inquired with some anxiety.

"Nervousness—only nervousness," he managed to stammer, feeling his throat on fire, and his hair dank on his temples.

"Well, sign," said the clerk.

Largeval took the pen mechanically, but hesitated still.

"It is forgery, positive forgery!" was his reflection.

In reality, of course, the substitution of persons, of which he was already guilty, was a forgery more flagrant and more audacious. But this had not the obvious, palpable character of the action of signing another man's name. He had not thought of these details in assuming his brother's personality. He had hoped to live quietly, happy in the joy of seeing his loved ones safe from want and harm; and he had cast himself headlong into an existence full of unforeseen disquieting incidents like this.

But this was not the moment for reflection. He must sign or confess himself an impostor at once. He signed; but the trembling hand, the fixed eyes, the half-open mouth scarcely denoted the usual satisfaction of the annuitant on pay-day. He remembered his brother's signature well—his own was not unlike it, and 'Remi Largeval' was written with tolerable success. His native honesty rebelled again against the touching of money that was not his, but constrained by the obvious impatience of the cashier, he crammed the notes and gold into his pockets, and got somehow into the street, where the fresh air revived him.

"What a fool I am," was his internal remonstrance, "to let myself be cast down by every fresh event in my new life! I must prepare myself for innumerable surprises that may come upon me at any turn, and must not find me taken aback. I shall have to go through a thorough schooling, and the sooner I begin the better."

The opportunity for commencing his education presented itself immediately in the robust person of Montussan, who stopped short in front of him.

"Eh! it is M. Largeval!"

"Myself, dear sir; so, you recognise me?"

"The more easily, that since that famous night I have been lucky enough to make the acquaintance of your brother and his family."

"Ah, my poor brother!"

"What has happened? But I see you are in mourning. Can it be that . . ."

"I am grieved to say, sir, that the very day when you saw him, my poor brother fell dead at my feet, seized with apoplexy."

The tone of sorrow was perfectly sincere. Largeval could not speak of his brother's death unmoved. Lucien stood stupefied.

"And what will become of Madam Largeval and the dear child whom I had the pleasure to see home?"

"The day of the accident? I know; my brother told me. Well, they are poor, very poor; but am I not at hand, thank Heaven? As long as I can prevent it they shall want for nothing."

"And you'll be only doing justice," Montussan replied

with unusual animation. "There is not a creature in this world who deserves help more than that charming child yonder. She ought to be happy if anybody is. If I could do anything in her service, sir, believe me I would do it with delight and devotion."

"I thank you in her name and in mine," Largeval said, a tear of gratitude in his eyes.

"And her arm?"

"It progresses as favourably as possible; only the poor child has not yet heard of her father's death, and we're anxious about how the news may affect her."

"Aye! the telling should be put off as long as possible."

"So, if you see the poor ladies, you will say nothing about our loss?"

"That I promise you," said Montussan; then, as George was about to walk on, he stopped him with the question, "And what about the robbers? Have you heard anything of them?"

"Nothing at all. All that has happened since then has almost driven the matter out of my head."

Largeval spoke with some uneasiness and went his way. Montussan turned into a café and proceeded to consume punch until satiety, not to say ebriety, supervened.

George locked up six thousand five hundred francs, and putting a thousand franc note in his pocket, went to see Laurence.

"My dear sister," he said, when he had taken a seat facing her, "I gather from all your husband told me on the day of his . . ."

With a discreet gesture Madam Largeval indicated that Geneviève was there.

"On the day of his departure, that you are in rather straitened circumstances for the moment. I want to do for you all that I should have done for him."

"Hypocrite!" Madam Largeval muttered.

Either George did not hear, or he would not understand. He drew the bank-note from his pocket and laid it on a side-table.

"This will suffice to go on with, and . . ."

"Geneviève," her mother said, "I want to talk on private business with M. Remi for a moment."

With wide-open, puzzled eyes, Geneviève withdrew.

"Sir," Laurence began, "death has just severed the relationship that existed between us."

"What can you mean?"

"I mean that as a widow I can be nothing to you, or at any rate, you are nothing to me. Therefore, I cannot accept the money which you offer, whatever your motive may have been in bringing it here."

"What! you refuse?"

"Positively!"

"But why?"

"You ask me why! Do you really want me to tell you why?"

George was dumfounded. Obviously there had been some secret between his wife and his brother. And the secret must have been a weighty one, since in her hopeless position Laurence would accept nothing

at his hands. But whatever the secret, he must feign to share it.

"Listen, Laurence, I may have acted wrongly towards you."

"You deign to admit as much," said his wife ironically.

"But I thought an event like George's death might draw together even relatives who have seriously quarrelled."

She remained frigid and disdainful.

"I ask your pardon for the past; I sincerely repent of it," he added at a venture; "if I have sinned against you in word or act, forgive, forget."

"That is impossible!"

"If you yourself must nourish rancour, accept for Geneviève's sake."

"My daughter and I will know how to live without your bounty. I am astounded that you dare propose it!"

"So you refuse absolutely?"

"Could I do otherwise?"

"How will you live?"

"As God wills. Have no care, you."

Laurence rose to indicate clearly that the interview was at an end.

"And so I cannot count upon your coming to see me now and then?"

"Certainly not."

"And if Geneviève should care to see her uncle, for she is always my niece though my brother be dead?"

"I shall do my best to dissuade her."

"But why—why?" cried George again, stumbling in his ignorance over a multitude of impossible suppositions.

Laurence's only response was a step towards the door.

"Let me come to see if you are well."

"As if that could matter to you!"

She had opened the door, and, thoroughly dazed, George left the house mechanically, descending the stairs slowly, as steps that led to his own home and that he was never more to mount save with his wife's—his widow's grudging permission.

"What was his crime—what did he do?" were the questions eternally recurring to him. "Laurence is charitable, indulgent—what could have made so determined an enemy of her?"

And then with a hopeless gesture—

"And now, after all, if I am not to help her, not to see her . . . if my poor Geneviève is never to feel her father's kiss, what was the use of my scheming, of my crime? My love for them lost me, and they are lost to me. A thief and a forger for their sake, and they will have none of me!"

Brooding thus bitterly, he betook himself to the cottage of the Rue Serpente.

IX.

NIGHT had come. He dined as well as he could and retired early. After a first, heavy, nightmare-haunted sleep, he awoke.

A clock struck two. At that moment Largeval fancied a voice below was crying, yelling in agony. He rose in his bed and listened. The noise was hardly human, a hideous howling coming from the bowels of the earth. There was fury, despair, terror in the sound, in the sepulchral clamour.

"What can it be?" George murmured; then he listened again, and a long silence succeeded. He was preparing to go anew to sleep, when a protracted plaint, a desperate and imploring scream, traversed the night. From time to time, too, he imagined that a dull, distant knocking could be heard. For a moment he thought of his dead brother, the brother whom he had robbed; but as he was essentially not superstitious he soon banished all fear.

"It is some one calling for help somewhere; but where?"

And he rose, dressed, and arming himself with a revolver, went downstairs. He was no poltroon. When he reached the ground-floor, the noise appeared to

come from without ; and fearlessly opening the house door, he proceeded thoroughly to explore the garden. There absolute silence reigned ; but while pursuing his search without, he heard again the cries, and they seemed to issue from the house. There, again, he could detect no sound that did not proceed from the garden.

"It is some extraordinary acoustic property of the place," he was at last obliged to conclude. "Tomorrow I'll elucidate it." And he went up to bed and slept, the cries having completely ceased.

In the morning his recollection was somewhat confused, but nevertheless he summoned Pascalín and questioned him. Pascalín had heard nothing during the night, and had slept at a stretch from midnight to six o'clock.

"Well," said Largeval, "I was awakened ; I had even to get up and come downstairs to discover the secret of the diabolical noises which disturbed me."

"Noises !" echoed Pascalín, with all the appearance of profound reflection.

"Aye ! hideous noises. They were howls even, sometimes."

"Did they sound like people making some violent effort ?" the concierge asked.

"Well, yes, I fancy they did."

Pascalín immediately broke into a long and loud guffaw.

"That's it ! that's it !" he spluttered out.

"Perhaps, Mr. Pascalín, you'll be good enough to tell me what it is ?" said Largeval with some asperity.

"It's bakers—nothing but bakers."

"Bakers!" George echoed angrily.

"Yes, sir, and they've got their bakehouse against your garden wall for the last eight days. They make that noise all night while they're treading the dough. That's what frightened you."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, you've been disturbed by journeymen bakers."

"All the better, Mr. Pascalin. That's a much more satisfactory explanation than any which I can imagine—thank you!"

The next night the same cries were heard, but Largeval paid slight attention to them, and lost not a moment's sleep through their persistence. Soon he became thoroughly accustomed to the noise, which had grown to resemble deep sighs coming from a remote part of the garden. Then the nights were silent again.

"I do not hear the bakers now," he said one day to Pascalin.

"There is nothing astonishing in that, sir. The master died last week, and as there was no widow to carry it on, the shop was given up."

It was the most natural explanation, and he accepted it with perfect indifference.

X

GEORGE LARGEVAL had completely organised his new life. He had provided himself with a servant, and he might have lived securely and happily, if only his wife had consented to accept his assistance, or even allowed him to see her. But her door was shut against him, and she made no sign.

How did mother and daughter maintain themselves? Here was the chief source of George's anxiety, while his most eager desire was to discover some means of helping them without their knowledge. He could find out no plan for disguising his charity. True, it was possible to look for a friend and to enlist his services by explaining the painful situation in which he and his nearest relatives were placed. But this would entail the disclosure of Laurence's repugnance to him, for which he could not find a reason. However, thinking it over day after day, at last he hit upon a possible scheme. He remembered Montussan.

"He'll assist me, or I'm much mistaken," was what he thought. "He's a harum-scarum fellow, to be sure, but I fancy that his heart is sound. I'll go to him."

And forthwith he set out in search of the Bohemian. A wild, hazardous chase it seemed at first, for he was

but vaguely cognisant of Lucien's name, and utterly ignorant of his address.

As he left home on this errand, an odd if insignificant thing happened. Mr. Pascalin was the proud possessor of a dog called Tac, a beast of extraordinary ugliness, which nature had afflicted with stiff yellow bristles and a film on one eye. On the other hand, the animal evinced such a keen intelligence, that it was the opinion of the majority of lodgers that, with a little more training, it would have made a concierge far superior to its master. The dog had been particularly attached to Remi; towards George it manifested an unaccountable antipathy. Once or twice already it had made inquiries into his character in the usual canine fashion. This time apparently it had made up its mind, for as Largeval passed through the court, the animal flew at him barking furiously.

"Hillo! what's the matter with him?" exclaimed George.

Exhibiting a threatening stretch of gleaming fangs, the dog was about to spring upon him, when the porter intervened, and Tac was for the moment reduced to a condition of growling passiveness. But the incident somewhat shook Largeval's nerves. He could not get it out of his mind that the porter's dog had divined his fraud, and resented it.

"I shall have to make Pascalin get rid of it, under the pretext that it is mad," was his concluding reflection as he went his way in search of Montussan.

He remembered that the Bohemian had been accom-

panied by Riaux, a well-known artist. He discovered the latter's address in the Paris Directory, and immediately presented himself at his studio.

"Ah! you want a talk with M. Montussan," was Riaux's answer to his explanation; "you could not have come at a better time. He is here."

"How lucky!"

"Only I do not know whether he is in a condition to see you."

"In a condition?" Largeval reiterated interrogatively.

"If you'll sit down, I'll go and see."

And Riaux lifted a heavy curtain and passed into an adjoining room, where George heard some words muttered in a savage tone. Then, abruptly, the Bohemian appeared.

Albeit half-tipsy, he was firm on his feet, but his shirt was open and creased, his hair was dishevelled; he held a long spoon with which he gesticulated vehemently.

He glanced at Largeval with an air of profound astonishment.

"Is this the absurd old man who wants to speak to me?" he asked, turning to Riaux.

The reception was not encouraging. Lucien's attitude was insolent,—his intoxication obvious. He was by no means the intermediary whom any one would choose in a delicate negotiation. He had not recognised the visitor, and, advancing with a strange smile, he sneered—

"You must have been deucedly in want of me to come so far, eh?"

"I did want to speak to you."

"Well, you may, but you must demand an audience, stating your Christian and surname."

"Do you not know me?"

"Know you! why should I? Do you know him, Riaux?"

"Certainly."

"Well, still he must demand an audience. Or, I tell you what," he continued, pointing with his spoon, "there is a work of genius, and painted by Riaux. You do not know anything about it, but it is. You're going to fall on your knees before it, and address litanies to it for ten minutes; and then I'm your man."

He was proceeding in the same strain, when Riaux caught him by the arm and whispered in his ear—

"Are you mad? It is M. Largeval,—can you not see it?"

"Largeval; yes, you said so, but I don't . . ."

"Do you remember Geneviève?"

At that question, Montussan sprang with a cry towards George and seized both his hands. Looking steadily in his face, he said—

"Ah! yes; you are Mademoiselle Geneviève's father."

"I am her uncle."

"No; her father."

"I assure you that I am her uncle," said George, quailing under the Bohemian's searching gaze.

"Her uncle is dead, I tell you; somebody told me so."

More disturbed by each successive word, Largeval grew red and pale every alternate moment. Montussan

held both his hands. He began to fear that the Bohemian had in truth recognised him. He resolved to end the scene.

"I see, sir, that I am come at an unfortunate moment. Pray, pardon me."

He took up his hat. Lucien stood still, making a strong effort to recover his reason. At last he cried—

"Riaux, a pound of ice."

Without answering, Riaux left the studio.

"You'll pardon me, sir, will you not?" said Montussan, turning to Largeval. "I do not know what I have been saying, but I must have been stupid and insulting. If you will wait ten minutes I shall be at your disposal."

Largeval stopped, his hand on the door knob.

"The ice is in the next room," said Riaux, returning.

"Excuse me one moment more," said Montussan, and he disappeared behind the curtain.

There he began to break the ice up in furious haste. Then rolling a towel in the form of a turban, he filled it with the ice chips, and tied the whole round his head. In a few minutes the intoxication disappeared as though by enchantment; and pale and shamefaced for once, Montussan re-entered the studio and walked straight up to Largeval.

"Once again, sir, pray do not remember anything which I said just now. Nothing could pain me more than to have offended Mademoiselle Geneviève's father."

As this was said in all sobriety, it greatly increased Lar-

geval's uneasiness. It must have been said intentionally and for some positive purpose, or else Montussan had really penetrated his secret. Riaux came to his rescue.

"My dear fellow, this is Mademoiselle Largeval's uncle, not her father. The gentleman has already told you so."

"Of course," exclaimed Lucien in a moment, striking his forehead. "I beg your pardon, sir. The frank and loyal expression which I noticed in your brother's eyes is also in yours. I was mistaken. Now, can I be of any service to you?"

"Could I speak to you alone for a moment?"

"Of course," returned the Bohemian; and they retired into a species of small withdrawing room.

"You are somewhat interested in my niece, if I mistake not?" were Largeval's first words.

"That's hardly the word. Mademoiselle Geneviève proved to me that there is something which beats now and then in my breast, and I'm so grateful for the service, that to be useful to her anyhow and in anything would be the greatest joy of my life."

"I thank you, sir. That being the case, I want to say this. My brother's death has left his widow and daughter in dire . . ."

"Yes; but you have money, have you not?" Montussan interrupted bluntly.

"I have money; but unfortunately my brother's widow will take nothing from me."

"And why?"

"I do not know."

"On your word?"

"On my word of honour. There must be something in the past that she has misunderstood . . . that I do not even remember."

"Well?" Montussan asked with his customary curtness.

"I want you to help me to save them from poverty."

"How?"

"I thought that you might devise some scheme; as, for instance, selling worthless things of theirs that I would buy at sufficiently high prices."

"You're a good fellow. How can Madam Largeval prefer starvation to your help?"

"Ah! if I only knew!"

"Have they any pictures?"

"Only wretched engravings, more wretchedly framed."

"That does not matter," Montussan exclaimed. "You will be able to buy one for five hundred francs in three days from this. And maybe you will not lose by the bargain."

"How will you manage?"

"That's my affair. You get your twenty-five louis ready, and you'll see."

"But be quick," said Largeval; "they have not a penny."

"So I thought on the morning of the accident."

"And thank you a thousand times," added George, wringing the Bohemian's hand.

As soon as he had left, Lucien filled the studio with the fantastic gyrations of a wild dance of triumph.

"What the deuce have you been drinking now?" said Riaux.

"Nothing; its Geneviève, my boy . . . Geneviève! You saw her: have you ever seen any sweeter angel?"

"All right! go on."

"Well, during three days I have been madly casting about for some means of helping her, of pleasing her; and here is that fine old fellow, her uncle, come with the very thing. Ah! I shall be able to do good to somebody at last."

"My poor dear Montussan, you're in love with her."

"In love with her! her purity, her innocent beauty! . . . I, the cynic, the debauchee! Hold your tongue, Riaux, or you'll make me furious."

"All very well, but . . ."

"I tell you that I should blush to think of love between me and that stainless child. Do not imagine it. I am her slave, her dog, if you like—but not her lover! If anybody else had suggested it, he would have felt pretty uncomfortable before this."

The painter went on tranquilly with his work.

"Ah! if I had come across such a girl twelve, or even ten years ago, she might have made a man of me. But in love, now! No; she's a goddess to me. It's reverence, not love, that I feel."

There was a moment's silence, and then Montussan said more tranquilly—

"No; as my life is now, there is only one possible end for it."

"End ! What about an end ?" asked Riaux, looking round at him somewhat anxiously.

"Why, suicide, of course. Do you think, when I'm fifty-five and worn-out like an old boot—do you think that I am going to be the laughing-stock of every sorry signboard dauber—every palette-scraper in Paris?"

"My poor Montussan, there was something wrong with that punch."

"Do not laugh. Before the final act, I feel younger to think that I can give the last of my strength, my intellect, my life, to little Geneviève."

Riaux rose.

"Shake hands, old fellow ! From to-day you're saved. And I'll thank Mademoiselle Geneviève for being good enough to exist, since she can make you speak like this."

"But she is not to know anything about what I am doing for her."

"As you like."

"And you'll help me, eh ?"

"With all my heart, and hands too."

"We'll have her married to her lover, that young jack-ass that must go floundering under omnibuses. And then, ladies and gentlemen, your servant ! Will you send her an announcement of the event ? I should like her to have a little cry over the old Bohemian."

Convinced that this was not likely to be the end, Riaux answered nothing. But after a long silence he spoke—

"Meanwhile you have not told me how you are going to make the Largevals accept your help."

"That is as simple as anything ! The uncle says that they have a lot of very ugly engravings, and abominably framed."

"And how are you going to coin those products of modern industry ?"

"You will see ; I'm going to begin to-morrow. I shall call ostensibly to see how the dear girl is ; I shall stare at the pictorial horrors, and cry out that underneath engravings framed exactly like them a lot of wonderful oil-paintings and water-colour sketches have recently been discovered."

"I do not see it yet."

"I shall tell them that you have only to take off the back of the picture to find the superior under-work."

"They'll want to try on the spot."

"Aye ! but it must be done carefully and by certain special processes. They will give me leave to try my hand at a couple. I shall carry them off ; bring them here, and straightway decorate them with some painting of my own, for which uncle Largeval will give four or five hundred francs. That'll last long enough to give young Gaston the time to marry his true love."

"By the by, why did you call the uncle father ?"

"For the reason which I gave. The father had something in his eyes which I fancied the other had not. But then, you see, I only saw the uncle for a few minutes in semi-darkness."

XI.

GEORGE'S return was not warmly welcomed by Tac, in the friendly sense of the adverb. The dog followed him, snarling and barking, to the steps of his house.

"You will not die of old age in this house, my friend," thought Largeval; and then he proceeded to instal himself in the little room that had served as Remi's study.

The arrangement that he had just concluded with Montussan made his thoughts run back to the inexplicable circumstances which rendered it imperative.

He could not imagine what act his brother could have committed that deserved such persistent rancour on the part of Laurence. Pondering on the mystery led him to bethink himself of means unexplored where by it might be made clear. His brother's papers! He had not searched them; they might furnish the clue.

To his surprise, when he came to examine them, they proved very considerable in bulk and number. Nearly all related to schemes for money-getting or money-keeping. But George was struck by one packet, carefully enveloped, which contained missives of an extraordinary description. They were written half in ordinary characters, half in cipher, the key whereof he found it im-

possible to discover. Then at the bottom of many of these mixed communications, and underneath an utterly illegible signature, was Remi's handwriting—

"Paid three hundred francs;" or, "Paid a hundred francs;" or, again, "Paid five hundred francs." Attentively comparing the dates, George came to the conclusion that his brother received these letters almost periodically.

"The deuce!" murmured George. "Remi could not have been so wonderfully well off if he had to pay like this. But why had he to pay?"

He was about to continue his explorations, when his servant announced a visitor.

"Who is it?"

"I do not know, sir. An old gentleman, not at all well dressed, and with a horrid ferret face."

"Well, I'll go to him," said Largeval, who nerved himself to meet a friend of his brother's.

Entering the drawing-room, he saw a little old man, needy in appearance, with restless eyes, a thin lip, a sharp nose—a visitor who looked at him savagely.

Largeval went towards him with the smile one assumes in greeting people whom one knows but slightly. But he had to abandon the manner abruptly when his visitor accosted him with—

"I don't ask you how you are, old fellow. It would be loss of time."

Largeval stared stupidly.

"You don't answer. You're right. That's not what ought to pass between us. But come, here's the correct

thing:—M. Largeval, what do you think of the sudden death of Marnaz-Lagoy?"

Overwhelmed with astonishment, George just managed to stammer—

"Think? why, nothing."

The little old man rose, stamped furiously and screamed—

"I say, are you trying a game on me? Pull out your coin, and that without more ado, too; or I shall just make a call on some people who keep big keys in their pockets."

Utterly bewildered, George Largeval yet understood that the stranger demanded money, and that money he must have. The man's threats sounded in his ears like disjointed pieces of some terrible history in the past. He could imagine nothing positive. For a moment he thought of answering the visitor in his own tone, and getting some information out of his rage. But the thought of his disguise, his forgery, made him quail. So he looked up and said jauntily—

"It was only a joke."

"Aye! but I don't like that kind of joke, my jovial Largeval. And the next time when you keep me at a distance, I'll settle your affair, you may be sure."

"Wait a minute," George said piteously; and leaving his enigmatic visitor to drum on the window-pane, he went for the money. He returned in a moment.

"There's five hundred francs."

"Now you know I don't like notes; they are too

difficult to change. Have you not got any gold? And you must have been expecting me every minute. I say, Remi, you must not get into bad habits, my man."

"I have gold too," said George, and he was compelled to produce it for the satisfaction of his extraordinary creditor.

The latter dropped the money in his pocket, and without even raising his hand to his hat, turned on his heel to go.

"You've forgotten the receipt," said George at a venture.

"Ten times you've made that same suggestion; but I am not such a fool. Ask idiots like Tricart and Perlot;—I don't parade my signature."

George hastened to see his visitor out, and he came back repeating to himself—

"So I shall see Tricart and Perlot appear one of these days. They give receipts, it appears. Those receipts are probably the cipher letters with the sums marked at the bottom."

He proceeded to re-examine the letters in question. He saw that, illegible at first, the signatures might easily pass for Tricart and Perlot. What had his brother done to be the companion, the paymaster of such men? And shuddering before the gulf which suddenly opened before him, George cried within himself—

"And what have I done in taking upon myself the responsibility of unknown crimes?"

But calmer a few minutes afterwards, he reflected that

it was perfectly possible that these men were merely old boon companions of his brother, to whom he owed money lost at play, and which he paid in this way by instalments. A little comforted by this idea, he recommenced his researches. But they led to nothing. No scrap of paper told him anything concerning his brother's quarrel with Laurence, nor indicated in any way the nature of his connection with Tricart, Perlot, and the man with the ferret face.

So he judged it prudent to be quiet and await events. Twice Montussan called, and sold to him water-colour sketches painted by himself and Riaux. For the first he gave three hundred francs, for the second five hundred ; and the one thought that relieved his misery in the unhappy life which he had recklessly made for himself was that means had been found to make his wife and daughter profit by his pain and peril.

Through Lucien he heard that her father's death had at last been made known to Geneviève. After a week's anguish and bodily suffering, she had recovered her health, if not her spirits.

Neither Perlot nor Tricart had appeared, and on this side the horizon was growing clearer. As for the ancient ferret, he was evidently an inevitable evil, and when he next presented himself, Largeval made up his mind to receive him with all courtesy and complaisance. He would ask him to dinner, make him drunk, and then draw from him the history of the hush-money, if hush-money it was. Thus the benevolent impostor's life was tranquil enough for the nonce, and might even at last

have become moderately happy if only it had been given him to kiss his daughter now and then.

One decided if trivial torment in it, however, was the too perspicuous Tac. The dog's ferocity increased every day, and at last George was compelled to remonstrate energetically with his porter.

"Your dog is becoming dangerous, Pascalin, and you had better get rid of it."

"Of Tac, my companion, the only creature that I have to speak to during three-fourths of the day?"

"I cannot help it. I do not want to die of hydrophobia; and I shall have to tell the landlord that either your dog goes or I."

"Very well, sir," the porter said with pitiful resignation; "poor Tac shall not offend you any more." And accordingly from that day the dog disappeared, or was imprisoned, sold, or hanged.

Delivered from this plague, George gave up a considerable portion of his time to day-dreams of the epoch when his wife and daughter would be restored to him. One or two hours of each day, however, he employed in arranging and classifying the property which was left by his brother. It was necessary that he should know his own belongings.

About a month after Remi's death, whilst turning over some unimportant bills and receipts contained in a camphor-wood box, Largeval made a notable discovery. An unguarded movement flung the box to the ground. A spring was touched, a double bottom was disclosed, and a few papers fluttered to the floor. At first George

was grievously disappointed. Nearly all the papers were covered with the mystic hieroglyphics that had defeated his divinatory powers in the missives of Tricart and Perlot. But finally he pounced upon a sealed envelope without address or writing of any kind. It contained a sheet of note-paper folded letter-wise, and bearing these words :—

“In case I should die suddenly, I wish to make it known that I possess, over and above my annuity, a sum of thirty-two thousand francs, which I have hidden on these premises, and which I shall only use in the event of special circumstances compelling me to leave Paris precipitately. This sum is in gold. Under the cottage are two cellars, where wine and wood are stored. Behind a pile of wood stacked in the second cellar, facing the door, is another door, the key of which is always in the lock. The displacing of the wood needs but a slight effort: it is piled on a low truck on wheels. The door opened, enter the third cellar, a vaulted chamber, having no issue except the door. Turning to the right, take, close to the wall, five steps of sixty-six inches each, from heel to heel. Then dig as deep as thirty-three inches, and thirty-two rouleaux of a thousand francs each will be found. A spade is in the corner of the cellar.”

There was no signature, but George recognised his brother's handwriting.

Thirty-two thousand francs! If he had only known it the day when his brother fell dead, what suffering, what crimes might have been avoided!

“It is a fortune,” thought George. “To-night, or

rather this moment, I will go down to the cellar. If I find the treasure, Laurence shall know all, and we will go abroad, as Remi intended to do, and live happily and peacefully on some little farm I'll buy."

Full of these golden prospects, he put the guiding paper in his pocket, lit a candle, and descended to the cellar. The stack of wood was easily moved, the key was in the door, the lock of which had been recently oiled, he remarked; the door opened, and at that moment his candle went out. A nameless horror seized him. Some shadow in the darkness must have breathed upon his light. Then ere reflection could come to his aid, an intolerable stench, that grew in intensity every moment, filled his nostrils. In a few seconds he was half suffocated, and now his terror was very great.

Blindly and madly groping, he made for the door. But the cellars had angles and corners that he knew not, and every movement brought him into contact with some obstacle, the touch of which redoubled his horror. He imagined ghastly sounds, he saw weird shapes. Involuntary cries for help came from his parched lips. The mephitic odour enveloped him like a shroud; and he was half choked by that, half maddened by fear, when he succeeded in coming to the surface and fresh air.

March was ending. A splendid sun made the buds of the chestnut trees burst. The air was almost saturated with the languorous scent of the early lilacs. The contrast was so delicious, so reviving, that in a few moments George breathed freely and was again full of hope.

"I am shamefully timid," said he in his own mind. "Nobody could live in that atmosphere, therefore nobody extinguished my candle. It is a combination of evil gases. The place has not been opened for years perhaps. The odour will spread and die away in a few hours, and then to work. Indeed, I think I can smell it here already."

So saying, Largeval went to the head of the spiral staircase that led to the cellars. In truth, the fearsome fumes were mounting like an irresistible invading army. Sick with disgust, Largeval opened doors and windows and betook himself to the garden.

But the while he walked, his servant, intent on dinner preparation, went down to the cellars in search of wine. She descended but a few steps, and a moment after Largeval saw her flying towards him white and shuddering.

"Oh, what a poisonous place, sir!" she cried.

"Where? what?" asked George, assuming an air of surprise.

"Don't you smell it, sir, in the cellar?"

"Well now, I fancy I do—like some . . ."

"Like some dead animal—M. Pascalín's dog, perhaps."

"You know he would not come near the cottage, Martha."

"Still, sir, you cannot dine without wine."

Largeval was inclined to suggest that some should be purchased without; but he was afraid of appearing anxious to conceal some subterranean secret, so he

simply recommended patience. His servant recommended Pascalin, and after a moment's reflection he adopted her suggestion. The infection must be caused by some infiltration, some defective drain, and Pascalin was the person the most likely to know where the evil was situated. As for his first fear, that the object of his underground errand might be divined, that was chimerical. He must be a very seer who could guess that thirty-two thousand francs lay buried in his cellar.

"Pascalin," he said, rousing the porter from a ponderous lethargy in a greasy leather arm-chair, "Pascalin, do you know the origin of a pestilential odour that is filling my cellars?"

"A bad odour!" said Pascalin, in sleepy surprise.

"Yes; can it be the drains of neighbouring houses?"

"No neighbouring houses except the baker's, and that's only against your garden wall. They would have to dig an underground passage to carry drainage into your cellars."

"Well, there is something—a something confoundedly unpleasant. Come and see."

The comforts of a greasy leather arm-chair could not prevail against the mandate of a tenant who was as liberal as George Largeval, and, yawning, the concierge followed him. He went no farther than the top of the cellar steps; thence he reeled back choking, and declaring that help must be fetched. Neighbours were summoned, strong men, who attempted the passage again and again, and fell back half faint-

ing, declaring that the descent was impossible without the employment of efficient disinfectants, which none of them possessed.

"Fetch the police," suggested one; "they'll get to the bottom of it all in an hour."

And Largeval eagerly accepted the idea, saying to himself that if the buried treasure was by any chance to be disinterred, the police were the best guardians of it."

An hour elapsed before the Commissary of Police arrived, accompanied by several policemen and three firemen provided with disinfecting apparatus. The Commissary, a young man, zealous and honest, albeit immoderately anxious to make his way, sniffed hard at the top of the cellar staircase, and emitted a peculiar grunt—a grunt that was doubtless a known eccentricity of his, for his men smiled when they heard it. He became more serious, and surveyed the group about him with a sharp and steady eye.

"Firemen," he ordered, "do your work. I fancy you will have some trouble."

He was right. The work of disinfection was carried on with vigour and pertinacity; but it was only after an hour's hard labour that a fireman reported—

"It doesn't smell of roses yet, but I fancy you would get as far as the first cellar with a handkerchief dipped in phœnic acid under your nose."

"Let us venture," said the Commissary, making the preparations which were recommended.

With his handkerchief to his nose also, Largeval fol

lowed, moved only by a gentle curiosity, and untroubled by fear. Despite everything, the stench was yet abominable, and but just endurable. The scene was a striking one. Torches emitting a strong odour of resin lit up the damp and sombre walls. The Commissary walked ahead, his long lank face, flanked by bushy whiskers, imperturbably serious. Behind was Largeval, then Pascalin, and two workmen summoned to help him. Then finally, bearing the torches, the policemen, who seemed to have taken up this position in order to prevent the escape of any one in the group.

Pascalin and Largeval were, naturally, the most keenly interested of all the spectators ; but neither knew more about the matter in hand than the most indifferent person there.

In the first cellar nothing more remarkable than a quantity of chloride of lime was perceptible. In the second, the exploration had the same result. Lastly, the door left open by Largeval was perceived. Two firemen entered first, bearing their torches aloft. They advanced two steps and retreated precipitately, with exclamations of horror.

"What is it?" asked the Commissary, pressing forward.

The torches were lowered.

"Two corpses!" cried Largeval and Pascalin simultaneously.

XII.

AT first the little group stood petrified with disgust. The spectacle before them had in it every element of extreme horror. Two men, two corpses, lay rotting on the dark ground. Both were fully dressed. A cap nearly new, and a large soft felt hat, lay on the floor. Obeying the Commissary's orders, the firemen proceeded to syringe the awful mass with phœnic acid, and in a few minutes the air became almost fit for human lungs.

Largeval stared with protruding eyes on the scene in a condition of indescribable stupefaction. Pascalin muttered incoherently to himself. Alone the Commissary retained his calm severity.

Taking a torch from one of the firemen, he bent over the dead men, and studied them long and closely. The faces were so emaciated as to resemble the visages of mummies.

"A terrible scene has been enacted in this cellar," said the Commissary seriously, but unmoved. "These men died of starvation."

"Of starvation!" Largeval repeated with a voice half-strangled.

"And it would be easy enough to reconstitute the entire history. See here! one of them has his face badly

bitten. Not by rats; something more hideous happened. When the poor wretches became quite convinced that they had been forgotten or purposely entombed here, when hunger became intolerable, stronger than their friendship, than their reason, they had one and the same idea—that which comes to shipwrecked men maddened with hunger. Here in this black cellar there was a death-struggle of cannibals that one hardly dares think of. They fought like furies; you can see that by the marks upon them. And then the weakest succumbed, and . . . well you can picture it; and you can see that this bigger one here was the better fed and died last: he is much less decomposed."

This was said with the calm precision of a scientific demonstration, a precision that carried to the minds of all present the conviction that the tragedy must have been enacted in this fashion. But nobody expressed his conviction, for all were deeply moved. The constables mechanically directed their gaze towards Largeval and Pascalin.

Seeing that nobody would speak, the Commissary followed the example of his subordinates, and turned towards Prudent Pascalin.

"Have you ever seen those two men?" was his question.

"Never," the porter answered simply, "and it is a puzzle to me how they could have got in here."

"And you, sir?" was the next question, addressed to George Largeval.

"Nor I either," replied George in a stifled voice.

"Very well," the Commissary replied quietly; "as we cannot touch the bodies without a magistrate's permission, we will adjourn upstairs, if you please. Leave everything as you found it. You will remember that we found all the doors open, even that of the third cellar."

They went up to the ground-floor. It was nearly seven o'clock, and night was falling rapidly. Pascalín was anxious to get back to his lodge and his soup.

"No, stay," ordered the Commissary. "I must examine you."

They went into a room which had no special character or destination; candles were brought, and the representative of authority installed himself at the head of the table.

"The discovery which we have just made," he began, "imposes on me the duty of making inquiry into the facts attending these two deaths. Consequently, I must take the evidence of every person domiciled in this house. To begin with, who is the tenant?"

"I, sir, Remi Largeval."

"How long have you lived here?"

"About seven years and a half."

"Have you any servant?"

"One—a woman."

"How long has she been with you, and what is her name?"

"Three weeks. Her name is Martha Lechêne."

"And before this servant, what other had you?"

"A woman called Alexandrine—I never knew her other name—and a boy called John."

"How old was he?"

"Sixteen."

"M. Largeval," said the Commissary gravely, "it is of the greatest importance to you that you should find out these two persons. It is probably they who introduced the poor wretches downstairs into your cellar."

"I know where Alexandrine is to be found," put in Pascalín, and he gave the address.

"Now, Miss Lechêne," the Commissary continued, turning to Largeval's servant, "do you go down into the cellar every day for wine, or whatever it may be?"

"Sometimes every other day, but generally every day."

"Did you go down yesterday?"

"Yes; and to-day I was going, but the stench prevented me."

"Did you smell anything yesterday?"

"Well, I thought the wood smelt a little queerly, but nothing like what we had to-day."

"Was the door of the third cellar open?"

"Third cellar! I've never seen but two."

"Then the third cellar was not open; to-day it was. Who went into the cellar? Do you think your master did?"

"Sir, I do not think so."

"Why not?"

Martha turned her eyes on Largeval, and tried to discover what her answer ought to be.

"Face me," said the Commissary, "and fear nothing; we can protect you."

"I don't fear anything, sir."

"Then why do you not think that your master went into the cellar?"

"Because he was taken by surprise when I went into the garden and told him about the odour."

"Is that true, M. Largeval?"

"Quite true," returned George, with some visible embarrassment.

"But you have been to the cellars. Why did you conceal this fact from your servant?"

Here Largeval hesitated a moment. The air seemed to thicken around him, to be black with some coming storm.

"You decline to answer?" said the Commissary abruptly.

"I beg your pardon," returned George, with the air of a man who has suddenly decided upon a course of action. "You will yourself see why I did not care to let my servant know that I had been in the cellar, when I tell you that in a corner of it I have buried thirty-two thousand francs in gold. I was about to disinter them for a special purpose, and it was only natural to prevent anybody knowing what I was about to do."

"Can you tell me what was the special purpose that induced you to dig up the gold?"

"Yes, sir," Largeval replied, after pondering for a moment. "I lost a dear brother about a month ago; his widow is left penniless. I was about to offer her this money in order that she might enter into some small business, or live on the interest which it would bring her in."

"We shall see directly whether this money really exists. Now be good enough to tell me what are your means of existence apart from these thirty thousand francs?"

George declared the amount of his annuity, and in response to the Commissary's further question, described the manner in which he had become possessed of it.

"Thank you, sir," the officer said when he had concluded. "One more and most important question, and I have done. Have you ever confided to any one the secret of this hiding-place of yours?"

"No, sir; at least I cannot recollect ever having done so. It might have escaped me under certain circumstances—as, for instance, after taking too much wine."

"Aye! that is possible."

"But I do not remember having committed the slightest indiscretion of that kind since my return to Paris."

"Still, there are only two solutions to the problem presented to us: either the two men whose bodies we have just found were shut in there by you . . ."

"Sir, for heaven's sake! with what motive?"

"That I do not quite see. Let me continue. Or else they themselves penetrated into the cellar, having heard that an important sum was concealed there."

"Yes, yes, that must be it," cried Largeval, with an ingenuous eagerness, that showed how painfully anxious he had been for the last few minutes. And had he not almost been accused of assassinating the two men found in his cellar?

Without appearing to notice his enthusiastic acquiescence, the Commissary said—

“I am inclined to think that there lies the explanation; but still we have to make out how they scented your secret deposit.”

George remained mute, concentrating all his faculties on the elucidation of this primary problem. It looked hopeless; but he began to feel that he was too nearly, too perilously interested in the question to give the riddle up easily. The Commissary waited politely for the result of his cogitations. At last his face lit up, and he exclaimed—

“I think that I can see a clue.”

“Let us see.”

“Guarding against the possibility of my dying suddenly, I wrote a note explaining to my heirs where and how the gold was to be found.”

“Well, and where did you place this note?”

“In the secret drawer of a little camphor-wood box that I have upstairs. Marthe, run upstairs and fetch it.”

In a moment the ready-handed maid had placed the little desk—for it served as a desk—before the Commissary. Instructed to press a certain lozenge in lemon-wood, he obeyed, and the secret drawer flew out, exposing a folded sheet of yellow paper. Slowly the Commissary mastered its contents, and then he became absorbed in deep meditation. At last he addressed Largeval—

“You think, then, that this paper may have been discovered?”

"I do ; by somebody ransacking the desk, for instance, who might accidentally light upon the secret of the concealed drawer. Or"—George had not dared hazard this supposition at first—"perhaps the case in falling might cause the drawer to spring out."

"We can try that immediately," said the Commissary.

And straightway he roughly pushed the desk off the table ; it fell with violence, and, effectively, the hidden drawer was hidden no longer. Largeval improved the occasion—

"A careless servant, who had overturned the case by accident, would pick up the paper, study it out of curiosity, and . . ."

"So you accuse your old servant, John."

"Not at all ; but he might have seen the paper and talked about it among comrades."

"That is possible again," said the Commissary ; and then he added very calmly, "But that does not explain how the thieves came to lock themselves in from the outside."

"Ah ! that I cannot say," returned Largeval taken aback.

At this moment Prudent Pascalín approached the table and remarked suggestively—

"Perhaps M. Largeval does not remember an adventure which we had here some time back, and that may have something to do with all this."

"What event?" asked Largeval, fearful of blundering into some unknown incident of his brother's career.

"Why, the night when the police rang you up, looking for two burglars who had scaled the garden wall."

"Yes, yes," said George, vaguely remembering that Montussan had told him something concerning this same night alarm, which his brother had appeared averse to dilate upon.

"I remember questioning two artists about that affair," put in the Commissary; "but I thought their story was the dream of a couple of Bohemians who had dined too freely for once."

"We found their footprints right up to the cottage steps, and no further," added Pascalín. "We searched the house and the cellars."

"But not the third," put in Largeval; "the entry was masked by a stack of fire-logs."

"Then make your mind easy, M. Largeval," said the Commissary cheerily; "your secret was known. These men were thieves, and you got off cheaply; for if you had gone down to your cellar a fortnight ago, who knows where you would be now?"

George shuddered, and his shudder was by no means simulated.

"Ah!" added the Commissary, "one thing more. Had you your young servant with you when these men got into the house, or rather the cellar?"

Largeval answered with immense audacity—

"I'm sure I cannot remember . . ."

"Oh, no, sir," Pascalín interrupted; "John had been gone twenty-four hours. Do you not remember that the alarm was the very night before the evening when your brother fell dead here?"

The Commissary leapt from his seat, and two clear, keen eyes were fixed on Largeval.

"Eh! what is that?"

"The burglars came the night before M. Largeval's brother died."

"Here, in this house?"

"Yes, sir."

"So, M. Largeval, your brother died in your house just twenty-four hours after these men slipped somehow into your cellar?"

"That is so," Largeval murmured, feeling himself once again in the grip of a cruel combination of circumstances.

"What was the cause of his death?"

"Apoplexy; he fell suddenly at my feet; and before I could help him he was dead."

"And he was quite alone with you?"

"Quite alone," George assented, his voice beginning to tremble.

The Commissary emitted the species of grunt whereat his subordinates were wont to smile.

"Mondard," he said suddenly, "take these instructions with you, and follow them out in the third cellar; then bring me back whatever you find—if you find anything."

"Very good, M. Bellant," the constable's rough voice answered; and taking one of his comrades with him, he proceeded to obey orders. Then the cruel catechism began again.

"What was your brother's profession?"

"He was a clerk, but he had lost his place the day of his death; his employer had become bankrupt."

"Had he any money of his own?"

"None; and he had come to ask me to help him provide for his family for a time."

The Commissary looked the wretched man full in the face and said coldly—

"Well and good; but it seems to me that there is a good deal of dying in your house."

The blood leapt to Largeval's forehead at the insinuation, and he cried indignantly—

"Do you dare to hint that I am my brother's murderer?"

"I hint nothing. I am not your accuser. I simply regard it as strange that there should be this superabundance of corpses on your premises."

"Pooh! you are pleased to be satirical," said Largeval, shrugging his shoulders.

"It is anything but satire, sir; and I advise you to take the matter very seriously indeed."

"But think, think for a moment," Largeval exclaimed. "My brother was poor. I had nothing to hope from him; what motive could I have to wish him harm? He has not been dead more than a month; let his body be exhumed. I demand it formally. There must be traces of foul play if he met with any. And the two men; it is hinted that I imprisoned them here. Again I ask to what end? I have never seen them before, but they have all the appearance of abandoned ruffians. It was I that had

everything to fear from them ; you yourself allow it. And whom will you persuade that I, who am a man of somewhat feeble frame, could master two robust scoundrels like those downstairs and lock them in my cellar like naughty children? No ; you will get no sane man to believe it."

This piece of special pleading was delivered with an accent of sincerity and honesty that impressed even the stolid Commissary, who answered somewhat more mildly—

"Your arguments are indeed sensible. But I can take no responsibility upon myself. The Juge d'Instruction will be here shortly, and he must decide what should be done."

Constable Mondard entered the room at this moment and touched his cap.

"Well, what is the result?" inquired the Commissary.

"We've dug up the nest-egg, sir, safe and sound. Thirty-two thousand francs wrapped up in brown paper. Here's twelve thousand francs," he added, pulling the sum out of his pocket ; "Garasse is bringing up the rest."

In spite of his anger Largeval drew near the table and contemplated the twelve rouleaux lying side by side. He opened one packet and was dazzled by the ironical glitter of the metal. He had doubted, doubted the existence of the treasure to the last, and doubt had been doubly poignant because he felt that should the gold be non-existent, not only would he lose his fortune, but his security must be additionally compromised. So it was with a little chuckle of triumph that he addressed the officer of justice—

"Well, sir, did I speak the truth? Is the money there, and do you still understand that I may have been the marked victim of robbers?"

The outer door was opened as he spoke, and the Juge d'Instruction entered the room at the conclusion of his remark.

His first proceeding was to examine the bodies, the cellar, and its surroundings. The bodies had not been touched, and the surgeon who accompanied the magistrate immediately supported the Commissary's theory that the men had died of starvation after attempting to devour one another. The Juge d'Instruction ordered that an exact description of the cellars should be made; that the bodies should be forthwith transported to the Morgue; and finally, he required that the dead men's pockets should be searched—a request that two constables obeyed with manifest and natural repugnance.

Three or four letters were found in the pockets of one man; all that was discovered on the other was a key and a number of small scraps of paper.

"There is writing on it," said the constable.

"All the better," returned the judge. "Have everything carefully preserved and take them to my chambers."

Letters and torn morsels were wrapped up and sealed with an official seal, and then the entire party went upstairs. There the magistrate informed the group collected that he required to be alone with the Commissary. He requested Largeval, however, to remain within call. Largeval bowed silently. He had recovered his presence of mind in a great degree. Nothing that

had recently transpired seemed calculated to do him any injury.

Closeted with the Commissary, the Juge d'Instruction listened patiently and silently to the former's minute narrative of all that had occurred. When the report was finished, the Commissary placed before his superior the notes he had taken of Largeval's, Pascalin's, and the servant's evidence. The magistrate read them slowly, weighing every word, shut his eyes for a moment, as if collecting his thoughts, and finally delivered his judgment.

"I think that Largeval was about to be robbed, and that up to the present moment there cannot be the slightest suspicion against him."

"I thought so too at first," the Commissary began.

"Pardon me, sir. Before you can accuse the man you must show that he had some kind of an interest in their death."

"It might have been a moral interest; the necessity for getting rid of accomplices, for instance."

"And do you think the man would have been fool enough to enter his cellar before he was quite sure that nothing but dried skeletons would be left of his victims? And supposing he went down, would he have done so in broad daylight? and, finally, would he have sent for you?"

"Yes; that is a point which made me doubt. But, then, the brother's death."

"Oh, that is the same thing. He had lost his situation, had come begging, and Largeval was willing to help him apparently, since he wanted the thirty-two thousand

francs for the purpose of aiding the wife and daughter. Why should he have killed his brother?"

"Well, sir, there is one more doubtful point. How did the two men lock themselves in?"

"Pah! their accomplices shut them in, or were unable from some cause or other to return."

The Commissary shook his head doubtfully.

"To resume: you know the axiom *is fecit cui prodest*. Neither you nor I see what motive Largeval could have in putting these men to death, and . . ."

A discreet tap at the door interrupted the magistrate, who requested the man who knocked to come in. It was a policeman, announcing that a revolver and two large dagger-knives had been found on the bodies.

"You see," said the Juge d'Instruction after the man had gone; "there is nothing to do but to issue warrants for the arrest of the servant John and the cook Alexandrine."

"If you will sign them, I will see that they are executed to-night."

The magistrate wrote a few words on two printed forms, signed them, and then opened the door.

"M. Largeval," he said, "I think that we have a clue to this appalling mystery. I believe that I may say that there is no charge against you as yet. But keep yourself at our disposal, if you please."

"I shall not leave the house," George returned, with evident relief.

"And you, Commissary, proceed to arrest these two servants without delay."

XIII.

ON the day of Largeval's slow torture, in the afternoon, Balkens, the Belgian, was walking down the Rue Fontaine towards the Boulevard, when looming ahead he saw the bulky form of Montussan.

Ever since the tipsy quarrel which constitutes the first scene of this drama—a quarrel which had resulted in nothing serious, thanks to Riaux—the Belgian avoided his antagonist, and this he attempted to do to-day. But Lucien apparently was in no humour to be avoided. His hat on the back of his head, he crossed the muddy street gaily, and smiling broadly, came towards Balkens with his hand extended.

"The deuce take the fellow!" muttered the Belgian.

"Good-day, my enemy," said Montussan.

"Good-day to you," returned Balkens drily.

"Eh! what a tragical expression! But you shall not depress me. I'm going to make friends, Balkens, and you cannot help it. To-day I am gentle, mild, innocent, and urbane as a blessed lamb. You look beautiful, and the world is full of smiles. Let us embrace."

Balkens fell back terrified.

"Do not be afraid. Men are all heroes to-day, and

women divine, and you are a clever fellow. Come, I forgive you your punch. What more would you have?"

"You pardon me?" exclaimed the Belgian astounded.

"Are you not astonished at my magnanimity? Come, laugh, say something witty. What would make you laugh? Shall I sing you the national air of Belgium?" And seeing Balkens slightly smile, he continued, "Ah! I knew that would bring you round."

And seizing the painter's two hands, he wrung them until the tears rose to his victim's eyes.

"Oh, but you must not be cross. I will not permit it; I am too happy to-day."

"Happy!" echoed the painter; "what has befallen you?"

"And to think that this immense gladness comes indirectly from you! There, shake hands again. I am the friend of all the world to-day."

Then taking the Belgian by the arm he proposed—

"Come with me to Riaux."

"I cannot; I must go as far as the Boulevard."

"Very well, then. I will see you soon again."

And as the Bohemian went his way whistling, the staid Belgian shrugged his shoulders, thinking—

"He is tipsy again, the wretched fellow! But this time at least he is amiably drunk."

On entering Riaux's studio, Montussan proceeded to gravely execute a saraband partaking of all the choregraphic characteristics of every nation and tribe in the universe. Then he threw his hat on to the venerable

head of a stone Jupiter, and confronted Riaux with his hands in his pockets.

"This is stark staring lunacy."

"Lunacy! Montaigne would say, 'What do I know?' and Rabelais, 'Perhaps.' But what I do know is, that I've got bugles blowing in my head, and that the world looks as if painted celestial blue. I feel as ethereal as a spirit. There are fools about who say that it is a horrible day; it is a beautiful day—I love it."

"You've seen Geneviève."

"Mademoiselle Geneviève, man. I should like to invent a new formula of respect for her alone. But fancy getting that out of mere human language!"

"What has she said, what has she done, in the name of all that is incoherent?"

Without answering, Montussan leapt to his feet, seized Riaux's palette and mahlstick, and had a virgin canvas up before him in less than two minutes.

"Wait!" he cried, and feverishly began to paint.

"It is phrenzy, but it is fine," said Riaux, watching with admiration how his comrade worked.

For, in truth, the picture, a girl's head, grew miraculously beneath the Bohemian's fevered hands. Ere twenty minutes had elapsed, Geneviève's face, a little idealised, though scarcely beautified, began to assume definite shape.

"You think you have seen her," he declaimed while he worked. "She was only the shadow of herself the day when you met her. I've studied her. It is a head which has never dreamt of the folly of turning out stupidly

The mouth is not a bit like the prunes and prism feature of boarding-school books of beauty. She has a mouth to laugh ; and ah ! what a laugh it is, Riaux ! Her cheeks have four dimples, old fellow ! The forehead is straight, and then her diadem of fine black hair ! A straight, serious nose corrects and calms the vivacity of the rest of her face. Her eyes—her eyes—there ! That was their expression to-day when I told her that her mother would receive Gaston and consent to their marriage."

"What ! you asked . . ."

"Of course. I'm going to see her married."

"But, my poor fellow, you love her."

"Who talked about me ? I did not. Now, hold your tongue ; I have just got the right tone."

Then for many minutes he painted in silence, only muttering from time to time, "'Not yet,' 'Yes, I have it,' 'As she thanked me to-day.'"

The portrait took form and colour with marvellous rapidity. Montussan's hand seemed to be moved by magic impulse, and the girl's head appeared clearer and firmer every moment, the glamour of his poetic conception surrounding and refining it.

He only stopped at seven o'clock, when dusk had come.

"To-morrow I shall have finished in twenty minutes," he said as he rose. "Let me put the precious sketch aside somewhere in a corner."

"You call that a sketch," said Riaux, marvelling at his facility, his genius even ; for there was genius, or the twin-brother of genius, assuredly, in the Bohemian's artistic feat.

"Sketch or not, no other eye but yours must see it."

"Now, will you be good enough to explain why you are brimming over with this insane joy. It is not because your turtledoves are going to get married at last."

"It is partly that and partly something else. But the something else sounds too ridiculous to be told."

"Go on! I'm not afraid."

"Well, you must understand that at each paroxysm of poor Madam Largeval's regret for her husband, I have managed to insinuate that it became more and more necessary to consent to her daughter's marriage with Gaston. At last she began to speak of it—crying, it is true, but still she spoke. But before I had mentioned young Gaston's name she gave me to understand—delicately, of course—that she would not have been surprised if I had . . . had asked for her daughter's hand."

"You!" exclaimed Riaux involuntarily.

"There is a cry from the heart," said Montussan rather sadly. "But it is not more sincere than the one I emitted when the remark was made."

Riaux commenced a lame excuse.

"Oh, it does not matter what you mean; your instinct is as good as mine. I! marry an innocent like that! Condemn her to ten years of Montussan! What crime has she committed to deserve that?"

"And yet you love her, Montussan."

"Well, then, yes. I love her . . . I love her! What of that? I shall be stronger than my love. I shall do one honest thing in my life—hide it from her, though

I die for it. Ah! you should have seen her this morning as she rose to thank me, with love in her eyes . . ."

"Love for the other!"

"Hold your tongue. And pressing my hand, she said, 'You are as kind as my good father. I must love you well to thank you for this.'"

"And that was enough for you?"

"Quite enough."

"You're not jealous of the other?"

"Riaux, you've a base mind; you see me content, happy, and then you come and try to poison it all with your whispers. There! send out for punch—a river of it. And then leave me alone for the night with my arch-consoler."

"I thought that you were to drink no more," observed Riaux.

"How can I help it, man, when you set all my being on fire?"

Riaux essayed to divert the current of his ideas.

"Do you know you have just turned out a miracle? You must send it to the Salon, and . . ."

"The Salon!" shouted Lucien. "Do you think that I'm going to profane my work, exhibit it before a hundred thousand Parisians, laughing, indifferent, or simply stupid? I know the portrait has some merit; there is many a man tolerably known perhaps who could not do as much. But it is mine, and I intend to keep it. I shall steal off with it to-morrow and hang it up in my room. It will light it, purify it; and I shall be able to speak to it as I dare not, as I would not speak to the original. The Salon!

Never! I shall have a frame after my own design, and to pay for it—for it will cost a mint of money, I can tell you—I'll turn out statues, oil-paintings, water-colours, sketches, anything by the dozen."

"You're incurable," said Riaux.

"I should hope I was," returned Montussan. "And now send for punch. I'm going to remain here all night."

"Montussan," Riaux protested earnestly, "Geneviève's name forbids you to drink and debase yourself henceforth. Do you not want her at least to respect and esteem you?"

"Oh, let me be!" replied the Bohemian. "If I am fool enough at my age to love a child like that, I am sufficiently clear-headed to see that all she feels for me is the commonplace gratitude which lovers have for the stage uncle who unites them. So send for punch, I say."

"Very well, I will send you some; and I shall see you here to-morrow."

The next morning Riaux found the portrait nearly finished and two bowls of punch intact.

"What! you've not taken anything all night?" he said.

"No; but, on the other hand, I have worked. Ah! what a thing it was to watch the dawn gradually unveil my beauty! If I were only a painter!"

"If!" exclaimed Riaux. "Look there!"

"Pooh! fancy work!"

Then, after giving a few last lingering touches to the depreciated picture, he snapped his fingers, retired to a distance, and surveyed it critically.

"Aye ! as I am the only person ever likely to look at it, it is finished enough as it is. And, by Jove, it is not a bad portrait, Riaux."

"Pooh ! mere fancy work !"

"Ah ! I would not bear malice like that. Come, have a glass of punch. Geneviève cannot object to a single glass, and, upon my word, I think I've earned one."

The friends clinked glasses, and Montussan took up a newspaper and threw himself back in a chair. His gaze was immediately attracted by a sensational title spreading across a prominent column in ponderous type.

"Ah ! another drama, as they call it, of course," he remarked gaily ; and then his face grew more serious, and the only answer he vouchsafed to Riaux's remark, "That drama seems to interest you all the same," was a laconic, "I should say so."

The 'affair Largeval' was recounted with fair accuracy. The newspapers were unanimous in intimating that Largeval had been in terrible danger. All were equally convinced that the two men whose bodies had been found had fallen victims to an accident, hitherto unexplained, at the moment when they were about to disentomb the concealed gold.

Montussan rose and walked to and fro with the paper in his hand.

"Is that not what I said, eh ? Those rascals were bound to be somewhere in the house, and they were in the house. I used to suspect Largeval, but then I did not know him. They must have found some extraordinary way of getting into the cellar, and that under our very

noses. Aye ! it is all clear. A servant was their accomplice, showed them in and turned the key, intending to return the next day. The next day he or she fell ill, or died, or could not manage it unnoticed, and the villains got—well, perhaps rather more than even their deserts.”

“It does not seem to me quite as clear as all that,” said Riaux.

“Bah ! my poor friend, you do not understand these things. But I cannot remain here. I must go and see Largeval and get all the particulars. The papers only tell you what the Prefecture, and the magistrates tell them. I’ll put my Geneviève in yonder room, and you must swear that nobody shall go in there, that nobody shall see it.”

“I swear.”

“Thank you !” said Montussan, locking the door and putting the key in his pocket. “Now I’m going. Won’t you come ?”

“Thanks ! I do not want to meet a world of worry half-way.”

“What worry ?”

“Why, we shall be witnesses, of course. Do you think that they have forgotten our names at the Commis-sary’s office ?”

“True,” said Montussan overjoyed ; “we shall be witnesses. Well, for myself, I shall not be sorry to study judges and gendarmes from the life.”

“Take care you do not study prisons from the inside,” said the painter, as Lucien with a laugh ran out, slamming the door behind him.

XIV.

AN hour afterwards Montussan was shaking hands with Largeval, who had not thoroughly got rid of the impressions of yesterday, albeit he had no fears for the future.

"Well!" cried Lucien immediately, "this explains every thing."

"What explains every thing?" asked Largeval, who never remembered the nocturnal visit paid by the Bohemian and his friend to Remi Largeval.

"But why did you not show us the other cellar?" asked Montussan, after pluming himself a little on his own perspicuity.

"How could I suppose," returned George calmly, "that strangers could penetrate to a place that had not been opened for six years, and the key of which was in my possession?"

"Now confess, M. Largeval," said Montussan jovially, "that the reason why you did not open the third cellar was that you were afraid some of us might light upon your treasure?"

"I'm ashamed to say you're right; and sorry I am at this moment to have been so foolishly fearful."

"If it is true that the poor wretches struggled like

cannibals in the darkness, surely you must have heard some noise, some cries?"

Largeval narrated how the nightly disturbance was attributed to bakers next door; and went on to remark that nearly all the newspapers gave an exact account of how the bodies had been brought to light.

"Only," he added, "they all missed the little pieces of paper found in the big fellow's pocket."

"Ah!" cried Montussan, "that was the note he wrote at Montmartre." And with voluble delight he described the close watch which he and his friend had kept on the taller of the two men. Had the presence of the artists on the eventful night been mentioned to the Commissary? And hearing that Pascalin had recalled the circumstance, the Bohemian asked abruptly—

"I suppose that you remember all the incidents of the night?"

Largeval was thoroughly ill at ease, but he had become somewhat accustomed to answering after the fashion of the Sibyls, and he responded readily enough—

"To tell you the truth, my nerves were so shaken by your visit, that, being only half-awake part of the time, I did not notice, or have forgotten many features of the scene."

"But you remember that when you opened the door it was double-locked and bolted?"

Yes, Largeval remembered that circumstance perfectly. He also admitted that the thieves must therefore have had the time to replace everything in order

before descending to the cellars. That admitted, Montussan persisted—

“Are you sure that there was nobody in the house beforehand to admit them?”

“I am not sure of anything,” returned George with some irritation; and feeling that if this examination were to continue much longer, he should either contradict himself egregiously, or come to a lamentable full stop, he resolved to arrest the flood, and rose with a gesture of apology.

“I am very sorry, but I am due at the Palace of Justice just now. I have to go through another, and I hope, a last, examination. You will pardon me.”

“I should like to go with you,” volunteered the irrepressible Bohemian.

“What would you do there?” inquired Largeval with visible impatience.

“I might throw some light on the facts too.”

“You had better wait until the Judge d’Instruction sends for you.”

“Perhaps,” said Montussan, beginning to remark that M. Largeval’s manner had disagreeably altered.

“You do not seem well. Am I in the way?”

“Not at all. I must go out, that is all. I’ll dress and walk with you as far as the quays.”

“I thought you had been requested to hold yourself at the disposition of the Judge d’Instruction.”

“Quite so; but surely I may go out all the same.”

“He is not going to the Palace of Justice at all,”

thought Montussan. "I'm in his way, and he goes out to get rid of me." Then he said aloud—

"I intended to go to your sister-in-law's, so I will not keep you."

"I'll go with you as far as her house," said Largeval, and immediately went up to dress.

Montussan walked to the window, and was thinking of all that he had learnt since yesterday, and feeling some dim doubts of Largeval rise in his mind, when a group of five or six persons appeared in the alley leading to the house. They were apparently led by a man yet young, but prematurely grave and rigid. Montussan had a hazy recollection of having seen him somewhere. The men who followed him were as serious as himself, but in face as well as in costume there were unmistakable evidences of inferior training and position. Following their movements with a puzzled interest, Lucien saw that two men were left at the garden door, while the rest of the party walked on towards the house. As the leader mounted the steps, he drew from his pocket a piece of tricolour ribbon, and attached it ostentatiously to his coat from button-hole to button-hole.

"Hullo!" said Montussan to himself, "I recognise him now; it is the Commissary of Police. He comes to make further inquiries, I suppose."

"Tell M. Largeval that I am waiting for him in the drawing-room," said the Commissary to the servant, and passed into the room where Montussan was sitting. He started slightly at sight of the Bohemian, but bowed to him ceremoniously.

"If I mistake not, sir, you are one of the artists arrested . . ."

"On a certain night in February. Quite right," Montussan put in affably.

"You know M. Largeval?"

"I have recently made his acquaintance, and I came to hear the particulars of a story in which I fancy I played a minor part."

"I would not be too proud of that part, if I were you."

"Why not, pray?"

The door opened, and Largeval entered smiling.

"I am at your service, sir."

"Follow me, if you please."

"Where?"

"To Mazas prison. I arrest you on a Judge d'Instruction's warrant."

George staggered but succeeded in remaining upright. His eyes haggard and his brain in a whirl, he was a very petrification of blank dismay.

"You arrest me . . . me?" he cried at last.

"You are Remi Largeval?"

He hesitated; but what could he say? Remi or George, all was one as far as liability to arrest was concerned.

"Yes, yes; I am Remi Largeval."

"Read the warrant," said the Commissary briefly.

"What is the charge against me?" he asked without looking at the paper. And gazing at it after a minute, he stammered, "I cannot . . . I cannot read. There is something before my eyes. I do not know what is the matter with me."

Montussan, who remained cool and observant during this scene, advanced and looked at the paper which Largeval held in his hand.

"You are accused of murder," he said.

"Of murder!" screamed Largeval. "They call me a murderer! It is madness—madness! Two villains armed to the teeth come here to attack me, and I—I am their murderer!"

"I certainly think," said Montussan with perfect calm and moderation, "that in this case the police are making a mistake."

"Be good enough to confine your remarks to matters of which you are competent to judge," said the Commissary with bilious asperity. "After what has passed, your presence here in the prisoner's house is anything but a point in your favour."

A sonorous burst of laughter was Montussan's irreverent answer.

On that day it happened that the Commissary was not in the most benign humour. With subalterns in the service of the law much depends upon humour. They are indulgent or implacable according to the disposition of the moment. With less responsibility than the president of a tribunal or a Judge d'Instruction, they have a greater latitude for the indulgence of personal spite or favour. The magistrate who has been refused the hand of his beloved by a barbarous parent, or, worse, by the cruel, indifferent daughter herself, is, without knowing it, not the same dispenser of justice as he who has just won a fair face, a large fortune.

"You forget yourself, sir," exclaimed the Commissary, stung out of his calm; "and you forget that I am in the exercise of my functions and have a right to your respect."

"Yes; but on the condition that you do not forget yourself so far as to hint that I am an accomplice of M. Largeval," returned the Bohemian boldly.

This was not the tone to take with M. Bellant, the police Commissary, whose temper was ruffled; he answered angrily—

"What I know of you would be sufficient reason for your arrest."

"Arrest me!" cried Montussan vehemently. "I defy you. I said that the police seemed to me to be making a mistake; and I have the right to say so until a regular court convicts M. Largeval. There is not a magistrate in France who would commit me. I dare you to arrest me."

For the moment the Commissary was powerless, and Montussan was right. But the Bohemian had just made for himself a determined enemy, or, at any rate, a rancorous adversary. Biting his lips, the Commissary turned to Largeval—

"Follow me, if this gentleman will permit it."

Montussan's answer to the sarcasm was a contemptuous shrug of his broad shoulders. Largeval asked to be allowed to pack up some linen and clothes. His demand was sternly refused, and his servant was forbidden to execute his orders. At last, it was conceded that a policeman might pack up a few shirts; but when Large-

val further suggested that he should bring down a few bank notes, the Commissary demurred—

"It is not for me," said George piteously ; "it is for my sister-in-law. M. Montussan would have given her the money."

"My orders are that nothing is to leave the house. The thirty-two thousand francs in specie especially are sequestrated."

George listened as in a dream, in a nightmare. He was a prisoner on his way to Mazas. That was all he could realise. Seeing him utterly cast down, witless from excess of nervous anxiety, Montussan came up to him and took his hand.

"Be of good courage. This will soon be over,"

"But . . . but my wife," George stammered.

"Your wife—you are married?"

"I am losing my head . . . my sister-in-law, I mean."

"I will watch over them. Rely upon me."

Forty minutes later Largeval was at Mazas, and had heard the great iron doors swing to and close upon him, with an icy trepidation common to all men who are prisoners for the first time. His name entered in the gaoler's book, and other formalities of a prisoner's welcome accomplished, he was ushered into his narrow cell, and the double door was locked on him. Hearing the key turned, he rushed to the door to ascertain if there was really this barrier between him and the outer world. It is the first movement of all prisoners ; they must realise their misfortune to the fullest, have it tangible, indisputable before them.

He came back to his stool, sat down, and dropping his aching head on to the narrow table fixed to the wall, wept like a woman.

Tears relieve even men sometimes ; and after a while he sat upright and contemplated the situation with clearer eyes.

But the clearest eyes see no farther than the purblind into mysteries like those which surrounded him. Of all the events of the last two or three days, which could he explain ? Had Remi been guilty of some devilish deed, that all these misfortunes should accumulate upon the head of his successor, his representative ? No ; a dire fatality was alone guilty of it all. Were Remi alive, he would be able to exculpate himself with a word. But his other self, the thief of his name as well as of his money, what could he say, knowing nothing of the life which Remi had lived apart from his kindred ? Spontaneously he could make no statement of value to any one. He must wait for the question before attempting to put forward anything plausible—wait for the inspiration of the moment. Or rather, he would cast himself upon the Judge d'Instruction's mercy—confess all ; and, if he was branded forger, at least they should not call him assassin.

A mercy surer than that of any judge ever ermined was extended to him : he fell asleep ; to be roused from his lethargy at ten o'clock by the sharp voice of a warder—

“Largeval, come up for examination.”

All the danger lay in that examination ; yet he gave

a sigh of relief. The very feebleness and versatility of his nature came to his succour, and as he mounted the steps of the prison-van, he was thinking "Why confess anything, after all? They'll keep me three or four days, then they will discover that I have told everything I know, and something will turn up, and I shall go free." He was becoming accustomed to the situation, like all prisoners after the first twelve hours, during which they will confess anything to obtain freedom.

At the Conciergerie he was conducted to the third storey, where, in the tone of a surly groom addressing a dog, the Municipal Guard in charge of him said, "Go in there!" And they entered together the spacious, and well-ventilated, and lighted gallery, filled with ushers, office-messengers, witnesses, and, lastly, gendarmes escorting accused persons. Largeval had not long to wait. His name was called aloud; and ere he had time to prepare his mind or his mien, he was ushered into the office, where the Judge d'Instruction sat writing.

XV.

AFTER a long quiet gaze into the prisoner's eyes—a gaze which George met with surprising firmness—the judge began the examination by consulting a paper on his desk.

"You are, Largeval, forty-nine years of age, an annuitant living on fifteen thousand francs a year?"

"That is right."

"Now, what is the origin of the thirty thousand francs found in your house?"

"The same origin as my annuity, which was given me by M. Cacerez, as I told the Commissary."

"Did M. Cacerez himself deposit the capital in *The Charity* insurance office, or did you?"

Largeval did not reply. He was in absolute ignorance of all the circumstances of his brother's fortune. But surely Cacerez would not throw away so large a capital by giving it absolutely to his protégé; he would invest it in his own name.

"It was M. Cacerez," he answered confidently.

"Now, are you quite sure that you were ever in Peru?"

"Sure!" cried Largeval, with sincere astonishment.

"Of course; otherwise how could I have saved M. Cacerez' life?"

"Well, Largeval, you tell a falsehood."

George rose, blushing and indignant at the abrupt accusation.

"I should answer you in very different fashion, sir, if I were free ; as it is, I simply affirm that I have been to Peru."

"And I affirm that M. Cacerez has never communicated with *The Charity* insurance company, and that you yourself paid in the capital required—two hundred and fifty-four thousand francs, on the 14th of March 1869 ; finally, that I am more than doubtful whether your too generous Peruvian ever existed."

Largeval felt quite horrified. On every side support seemed to fail him. He was to bear the weight of an unknown mountain of infamy, and already he sunk beneath the burden. He was the responsible backer of a bill for a nameless sum—it might be hundreds, it might be millions, and he was beginning to incline to the opinion that it would probably turn out the latter sum. Seeing that he would not break his obstinate silence, the magistrate observed—

"We have sent to the French Consul at Arica making inquiries concerning M. Cacerez. To-morrow we shall know how much truth there is in your statement."

George felt himself helpless. There was Remi's statement, the only one which he knew ; there was the positive asseveration of the law. He was indeterminate, though on the rack. To confess the truth meant penal servitude, the dishonour of wife and daughter. But at least they had not yet proved him guilty of murder. So he protested tamely, but with real emotion—

"I am innocent, sir. Never since I have been a man have I swerved from the path of honesty. Nobody can accuse me of the smallest peccadillo. I have no debts, and, I believe, no enemies. I do not know what the charge is against me. Whatever it may be, I am innocent, sir."

Convinced that he had before him a malefactor of dangerous character, yet the magistrate felt moved, against his reason, by Largeval's tone and look.

"Largeval," he said gently, "let me advise you. You would do best to confess everything, and, above all, to explain how the events in which you are concerned happened."

"What events? I do not understand your question. I am innocent."

"All prisoners are innocent until we prove them guilty. And let me tell you that silence is nearly always the most damning evidence against them."

"I am charged with murder," said Largeval, desperately. "I should like to know, sir, whether you base that charge on the fact of two dead bodies being found in a cellar under my house?"

"On that, and also on another fact. You are intelligent enough to know that the judicial authorities would not arrest a man well known and respected in his neighbourhood, if they had not evidence enough to prove him a cunning and dangerous criminal. Largeval, do you know a man called Tricart?"

"No!"

The monosyllable was uttered in a tone of sincerity,

the speaker's glance was so frank and loyal, that the magistrate for a moment felt his conviction collapsing.

"Do you know a certain Perlot?"

"No! I cannot tell what part these men play in the wretched drama that seems to envelop me."

"Very good; then I will be explicit. Letters in cipher were found in one of your drawers. You know of their existence?"

"I do."

"That they were addressed to you?"

Again the prisoner could say neither yes nor no. Either monosyllable was big with danger.

"You decline to answer. Well, here are the letters, written in a cipher which we have been able to divine."

"That's more than I could do," said Largeval ingenuously.

"Moreover, the pieces of paper found in the pocket of the taller man have been arranged so as to form a letter of alarming significance. This I will read to you. In cipher it is as follows—

"'4'M 204N2 100 9EE 6E8LO1O O8 8A1O3E8 4 83ALL
W841OE 34M. 10349 W4LL. 8EAC3 8. 9E86EN1OE 41
103E8E 49 NO DAN2E8; 90 NO 34D4N2 4N 8A1O3OLE9.
WE'8E 184END9 WO81O3 8ECE4V4N2 WELL. 41 9UB1OE8-
8ANEAN D4224N29 A8E 68O6O9ED WA8E 910O8M9 ! WE'D
BLOW 103E 2A11. 8OU4LL'D BE LA22ED, AND 3E'9 A 96V.
10AKE 3EED, 8EM4. 1084CA810.'"

Largeval listened vacantly. The incongruous sounds were part of a bad dream, nothing more. M. Mestras awoke him.

"Now, Largeval, be good enough to translate that. You recognise the cipher?"

"I do; but I cannot read it; the letters came to me I know not why. I thought they must be a practical joke."

"You persist in pretending that you cannot read this?"

"I do, and I do not believe anybody can."

"You are wrong; and if that belief is the only thing that prevents you from making a complete avowal, let me dispel it. The cipher is childishly easy. This is the theory of it. You leave the five first letters of the alphabet as they are; the five following are replaced by figures 1 to 5; from the eleventh to the fifteenth the letters do not change; P is 6, and so on until T, which is 10; the rest of the alphabet does not change. This ascertained, nothing was easier than to read the note which Tricart was about to send you, but did not, preferring to come in person. Now, will you acknowledge that you know as much as I?"

"But, sir, it is the truth, the sacred truth, that I could not read a line without your explanation before my eyes."

For a moment the judge frowned, and a coming tempest was in the air. But he controlled himself, and said with perfect serenity—

"Well, since you compel me, I will show you what your comrade Tricart wrote to you—

"I'm going to see Perlot, or rather I shall write him. This will reach R. Serpente if there is no danger; so no hiding in rats' holes. We're friends worth receiving

well. If subterranean diggings are proposed again, ware storms! We'd blow the gaff. Rouill.'d be lagged, and he's a spy. Take heed, Remi. TRICART."

"That's it—that's it!" Largeval exclaimed ingenuously, simply pleased to see a puzzle elucidated.

"Aha!" the judge said, rubbing his hands, "here is a first avowal."

"Not at all, sir," George replied sharply. "Thanks to your explanation, I understand the words, not the sense. I have never seen either Tricart or Perlot, nor the man whose name does not finish, Rouill . . ."

"Rouillouze! come, you know that. And you must see that your name, Remi, is plainly written in the letter."

"I see—I see everything," cried the poor impostor, "but I understand nothing."

"Well, then, I must enlighten you as to the conduct of your own affairs, the facts being gathered from documents found in your desk and drawers. At fixed dates you were in the habit of giving these men sums varying from two hundred to five hundred francs. Tricart and Perlot were known to be ticket-of-leave men, who were wanted by the police for an audacious robbery committed in the Temple quarter."

"And am I supposed to be in that?" cried George with dolorous sarcasm. The judge went on without answering him.

"These convicts knew that they should find a sure asylum in your house. Two or three words in the letter which I have just read prove that you were not very inclined to welcome them; but you gave in, from fear

of the revelations which they could make concerning you. Thus they were taking your money periodically ; they had a hold on you ; and you consented to conceal them in your cellar."

Panting like a hunted animal, Largeval began to realise the fiery circle of evidence that was closing in around him.

"No, no!" he exclaimed breathlessly ; "it is too much."

"So, Tricart and Perlot made for your house," continued the magistrate imperturbably ; "and they chose, of course, an hour when nobody was likely to see them climb your garden wall. You were waiting for them."

"Never! never!"

"Your denials are only useless interruptions. Two artists, however, had tracked Tricart and, subsequently, Perlot for their own amusement, and they saw your visitors scale the wall. Arrested themselves, they prevailed on the policemen to search your garden. But you had taken every precaution. You had hidden your men securely, and you even ventured to give the constables wine in the cellar adjoining their hiding-place. Your accomplices once shut up . . ."

"My accomplices!" echoed Largeval, struck by the word.

"Of course," said the magistrate impatiently. "Does one receive simple acquaintances into one's cellar in the dead of night? I say, your accomplices once shut up, you perceived that the easiest way of getting for ever rid of them was never to let them out. The position of your

house facilitated your project. Only you could hear the poor wretches' cries and knocks, and you knew perfectly well whence these came. In short, you murdered Tri-cart and Perlot, Largeval ; the evidence against you is overwhelming."

The prisoner's head fell on his hands, and he muttered hoarsely to himself, "And I have only myself to blame ! I threw myself like a fool into a whirlpool, and it is surging in my ears !" The idea of the substitution of persons had seemed to him at first so simple, so innocent even ; and at this moment it rose against him with the arms of Briareus outstretched to strangle him. He returned to his first plan—to confess the truth, and escape at least this unmerited anguish. All this passed tumultuously through his mind while the Judge d'Instruction gave his secretary the necessary instructions for the preparation of the report of the examination. Largeval threw his head up at last with a gesture of resolution.

"Sir, I think I shall be able to prove to you that, guilty of a grave error, I am innocent of the crime you lay to my account."

"I am listening to you. But do not rely upon falsehoods—they will not serve you."

"Firstly, you'll remember, sir, that it was I who sent for the police ; and that I brought neighbours, workmen, my concierge, to assist at the fumigation of the cellar. Then I went down in full daylight, openly, scarcely a fortnight after the date when these men must have died."

"What do you conclude ?"

"That if I were the hardened, experienced criminal whom you suppose me to be, I should certainly have done none of these things ; therefore, that I am innocent."

"These are certainly good points in your favour, but that is all."

"Well then, sir, I must unbosom myself completely."

"The best thing you can do, Largeval."

"Ah ! but not in the sense you mean. I am guilty of a grave error ; I am not guilty of murder. You have heard that I had a brother—you have heard of the astounding resemblance that existed between us ?"

"Yes, vaguely."

"I am not Remi Largeval . . . I am George."

"But . . . but George died at your house," exclaimed the magistrate, considerably nonplussed.

"Remi fell dead in his own house. I was there ; I had gone there to ask him for a loan to keep me afloat for a while. He died at my feet."

"And you pretend that . . ."

"I affirm, sir, that the evil thought came to me then—how I curse it now !—to profit by the strange similarity of our faces and figures, and . . . and palm myself off on the world as my brother. Remi concealed Tricart and Perlot ; his sudden death brought about theirs."

M. Mestras was observing Largeval with something like admiration.

"That is a remarkable faculty of yours," he said, when George had halted almost breathless.

"Faculty ! what faculty ?"

"Oh, that ready invention—spontaneous imagination."

"What! you do not believe me when I accuse myself, when I tell you the truth, explain everything."

"You have explained nothing."

"Shall I repeat what . . ."

"No, no! I know everything that could be said in your favour. Your story is really too clever to be true; not badly constructed, though," the magistrate added half to himself. "The only thing which I gather from this is that you confess yourself guilty in the person of a supposed dead Remi."

"Ah! but now I have confessed I will convince you—I can. There are things known only to me which will prove to you that I am George. Transactions at my employer, M. Roulleau's office. I can recall that on some day they sold certain goods, that on another I blotted my ledger."

"Enough, Largeval. When a man of your intelligence wants to create proofs of innocence, he knows how to lay his plans a long time in advance."

"Still you cannot refuse to verify my statements."

"Oh, no! In a very short time I shall give you a chance of showing how far impudence and cunning can go."

"Impudence!" cried the prisoner, wildly casting about for conclusive proofs. "But name a test, give me a criterion—I'll submit to anything. You cannot have any personal malice against me. We are strangers. Show me how I can prove to you that I am . . . that I am

myself. Find me some way of showing that I speak the truth. I have stolen a name—my brother's name. I have stolen his money, if you will. But I have never shed blood; I have never seen the dead men, Tricart and Perlot and the others. I am George Largeval."

M. Mestras had listened attentively and with no anti-pathetic interest.

"You spoke just now of your wife and daughter," he said slowly. "Have you seen them since you adopted your pretended disguise?"

"Yes, sir, I have seen them twice."

"Then they are your accomplices in this fraud?"

"No, sir; I called myself Remi Largeval even to them."

"And they failed to recognise you?"

"Yes!"

"Come, come now, Largeval; you are no longer keeping up your reputation for intelligence. You do not mean to tell me that the woman who has shared your life for twenty years could not distinguish your visage from that of her brother-in-law? It is almost insulting the majesty of the law to advance an enormity like that."

"Send for my wife, sir—send for my wife; she will know me now, if I am allowed to speak to her."

"I dare say! She will try to save a relative, like a tender-hearted woman. But be that as it may, to-morrow you will see her."

XVI.

AN usher entered, as the judge uttered this promise, and tendered a paper, at which he glanced, saying—

“Ah! they have taken him? And that just at the right time. Show the man in.”

A few seconds afterwards the door opened and a manacled figure was thrust into the room. Largeval looked at him mechanically, but leapt back with amazement on recognising the little old man with the ferret face, whose acquaintance he had made in the Rue Serpente. The Judge d’Instruction noticed the movement.

“Aha! So you do know each other? You need not have taken all that trouble, Largeval, to invent that little fairy tale of yours, or at least you should have guarded yourself better.”

Each word seemed an avalanche forcing George deeper down into the chasm where he was wrestling with fate.

“Largeval,” said the Judge d’Instruction severely, “do you recognise this man?”

George had formed a sudden resolution to cling to truth as to dear life, wherefore he answered, serenely, “Yes!”

“So you acknowledge that you and Rouillouze are friends?”

"Not at all. I saw this man for the first time in the Rue Serpente after I had been paid an instalment of my brother's annuity. I could not understand what he meant."

The hardened scoundrel who had just been introduced, gazed in sardonic astonishment at George.

"What did he say?"

"He spoke of somebody's death . . . somebody whose name I had never heard."

"Old humbug!" muttered the old man, smiling more than ever.

"I finally understood that my brother had been connected with him in some affair, the result of which was that Remi had to pay him a sum of five hundred francs at certain fixed dates. As I wished to retain the position which I had so laboriously and painfully acquired, I paid him the money."

"What do you say to that, Rouillouze?"

"What can one say?" returned the grey-headed cynic, looking insolently into the magistrate's eyes, "what can one say before one knows what the gentleman is driving at?"

"Largeval pretends that he is not Remi, but George Largeval."

"Ha, ha! He pretends that?"

"I will swear it on the scaffold," exclaimed George.

"You have plenty of pluck, old boy! Deny everything—that is good policy generally. But when it's all up, what's the use? The cork is drawn, the wine must be drunk, and we'll swallow it together, old comrade."

"The resemblance deceives you too. I am not surprised at it, since it deceived my wife. But I maintain that I never saw you till the other day ; I do not know who you are ; and I'm glad they have arrested you."

"Sweet nature !" murmured the old man.

"Because," George continued, "at last I shall know what crime my brother really did commit."

"My dear Remi," said Rouillouze, with an evil leer, "you're beautiful. I see you're still the intelligent rascal of former days. But you know that I've only got to say a word to shut up your mouth at once."

"Say it then, in Heaven's name," cried George.

Rouillouze appeared strongly impressed by the energy of the exclamation.

"What a chap !" he muttered ; "he'll persist under the knife of the guillotine." Then he added aloud, "After all, perhaps I'm wrong and this gentleman is right."

"Come, Rouillouze," M. Mestras interrupted, "you have many and grave charges to meet. Your punishment at the best must be very heavy. Do something to mitigate it ; tell the truth here . . ."

"And you'll promise that they'll give me tobacco and a drop of brandy now and then ?" interrupted Rouillouze.

"I will recommend you to the prison authorities."

"That won't do ; promise."

"You shall have what you want."

"Then here goes for a clean breast of it. The gentleman says that he is Largeval's brother ; then why did he recommence an old dodge of Remi's in precisely Remi's words, and ask me for a receipt ? Why did he look as if

he didn't understand when I spoke the words agreed upon between us—a ridiculous joke which Remi kept up for years?"

"Do you know Tricart and Perlot?"

"Rather!"

"What do you know about them?"

"Everything! They were chaps I didn't care about, always threatening one; but a fine talent in our line, I can tell you. Largeval knew them years ago. They began together by cardsharpping in gambling-dens. But it isn't a paying business, that, in the long-run, whatever people may say."

"You are speaking of my brother all this time. I cannot answer for anything which he may have done."

"All right, old man; it's allowed. Be what you like, I only know that I have been acquainted with you these twenty years, and that you've done some deuced queer things within my experience."

He stopped for a moment as if to revive his memory.

"Ah! one thing by the by. This gentleman says he has been round the world, and the moon, and the deuce knows what. Well, just nine years ago he was lodging in the suburbs of Montrouge, hiding under the name of Laurent, only going out at night, and living on the profits of several peculiar industries."

"So he never left France?"

"So little, it's not worth mentioning."

"Do you know how he made his fortune?"

"Yes!"

George Largeval leant forward with a movement of

curiosity. At last the clouds were to roll away, and he would know the mysterious source of the money which he had long coveted, and at last appropriated. He had learnt already that his brother, the traveller, had never left France, where his presence in concealment argued powerfully against the possibility of his being engaged in any lawful traffic. The secrets which Rouillouze had to divulge were evil ones, yet George longed for the revelation with the yearning of a man who has had a very surfeit of mystery. But at the last moment Rouillouze appeared to become recalcitrant. He hesitated, seemed to consult his memory, and finally announced that, "No, he wasn't going to tell them that story."

"What new freak is this?" asked M. Mestras sternly.

"Oh, you know that I never like to split on a comrade."

"You did not think of that just now. Are you not rather afraid that some of your own misdeeds must find their way into the story?"

"No; I'm not afraid of that. Ask Largeval."

"The man knows nothing against my brother. He is keeping us waiting until he has had time to concoct some story."

"Ah! that's it, is it?" cried Rouillouze, his small eyes gleaming spitefully. "You know that if I did speak you'd creep back to your hole like a rat with a terrier after it; aye, and never come out again till you went your last journey to the Place de la Roquette."

"I am not afraid," said George; "if you knew anything you would speak."

"What! you really want me to tell about the seventeenth of February?"

"Anything you like; everything you know."

"It was the seventeenth, was it, Largeval?"

"How am I to know?"

"There's a mule for you!" muttered the old man; and then, exasperated, he added, "Mind, you've brought it on yourself."

"Come, go on, Rouillouze," said the magistrate.

I am going on, sir. I said the seventeenth of February; it ought to be the eighteenth, for it was past midnight. At that time we were a fine gallant company, Largeval, Tricart, Perlot, and I. Dressed up to our eyes, we had a clean shave and a clean shirt every day; and regular swell tailors, I can tell you."

"What did you do for a living?" inquired M. Mestras.

"Ah! that's telling. One thing is certain, that we did live, and like fighting cocks too. Every night we used to meet at the house of a charming German lady, Madam Siefert, who didn't at all object to cards. There we used to pay assiduous court to the Queen of Hearts, who often had no heart at all. Largeval was a fine player, there's no mistake about that. You have seen how cleverly he can play a losing game . . ."

George was about to interrupt, but the hoary cynic prevented him.

"Moreover, he was said to be first-rate at turning up the opportune ace. I, who was never clever with my fingers, am not able to say whether it was true, but he had that reputation."

"The reputation of a cardsharp, in fact."

"I didn't mean that ; and the proof of it is that in the beginning of 1869 the poor dear fellow . . . you see how nicely I'm speaking of you, Remi," he added parenthetically, with a viperous glance at Largeval, who remained unmoved, determined to endure the man's familiarities uncomplainingly—"the poor dear fellow was afflicted with an infernal run of ill luck. It worried him. It worried him the more because every night at Madam Siefert's there were a dozen paunchy fellows with their pockets full of bank-notes."

"Well ?"

"Well, the fellows with the notes took everything, hang them ! Largeval had borrowed right and left, and all the money was in these rich fellows' pockets. To make bad worse, Tricart, Perlot, and myself were just as unlucky. We came to our last resources with a run. Largeval—he called himself Laurent then—Largeval had a fancy that the winners were just a little nimbler with their fingers than ourselves ; but watch and excite them as he might, he could never get at their dodge, supposing they had one."

"Be brief, Rouillouze ; we don't want your reflections," said the magistrate.

"Here's the interesting part. One night Largeval made his appearance in the rooms with an individual whom nobody had ever seen before. Our dear friend was in an infernal mood. He had a nasty look about the eyes, and it would have been better not to meet him in a dark lane with nobody near. He made an effort,

however, and produced something like a smile in answer to a nice lady who seemed inclined to like him."

"Rouillouze, moderate your expressions."

"Eh! you must take my expressions as they come," said Rouillouze insolently, "or send me back to prison. I was saying that I remember the lady particularly, because she and I had had a little flirtation together—he! he! Well, Largeval introduced his friend to her and to the mistress of the house, and then planted him at the baccarat table.

"'Who is it?' asked Tricart.

"'A man who is playing his last game. He has five thousand francs left, and has come here to make it a hundred thousand. If he loses, the revolver's ready. His name's Marnaz-Lagoy.'

"Marnaz-Lagoy—I don't believe that was his name, but it doesn't matter—was winning furiously, and seemed likely to clean out everybody in the room, only Madam Siefert informed us that the banker had a hundred and fifty thousand francs about him. Ah! if my eyes glittered at the mention of the seductive figure, they were mere bottle-glass to Remi's. Looking at them, I didn't envy the possessor of those hundred and fifty thousand."

Rouillouze said this with a little laugh that made George and even the magistrate shudder.

"Can this be Remi he is speaking of?" was George's constant question.

Rouillouze continued—

"Madam Siefert was good enough to tell us that altogether there were three hundred thousand francs to be

won in her rooms that night, several other players having provided themselves with considerable sums. The game went on, and Marnaz-Lagoy continued to rake in everything, without betraying the slightest excitement. Even his hands, the worst tell-tales, betrayed nothing. Soon his stakes became enormous. Checked once or twice, he caught himself up with astounding rapidity, and reached a point when he'd lay nothing less than twenty thousand francs on a card. At last he had made two hundred thousand francs, and then his cool prudence deserted him. He ought to have taken a cab and gone home with his winnings; but no, he rose up and said—

“‘If nobody claims the bank, I take it.’

“It was madness, of course. There were three or four players with very pretty sums left in their pockets, and in all likelihood they would end by breaking the bank. Well, it did not happen, not a bit of it. That infernal Marnaz-Lagoy went on in the way he had begun, and in thirty-five minutes the last players were drained dry, and Largeval's friend had about three hundred thousand francs before him. It was enough to make any man lose his head, and he lost his. Largeval stole up to him softly and craftily, and his eyes were not nice to see.”

“What time was it?” asked the judge.

“About half-past one in the morning. Marnaz-Lagoy was rolling his notes into bundles and stuffing them into the large pockets of his frock-coat. These were soon full, and the rest of his spoils he had to wrap up in a newspaper, leaving a thousand-franc note on the table.

" 'I should be obliged, Madam,' he said, turning to Madam Siefert, 'if you could give us supper. The least I can do is to offer these gentlemen something that may restore and cheer them.'

"Madam Siefert was capital at that kind of thing, and in a few minutes a prodigious supper was organised. The ladies manœuvréd considerably to get a place near the hero of the evening; but Largeval was a sharper dodger than the sharpest Machiavelli in petticoats, and he secured the right-hand side. The wine flowed freely, as you may suppose. The losers drank to console themselves; Tricart, Perlot, and I drank from lassitude and ennui. But we remained cool enough to keep an eye on Largeval. He was superb. He had the solicitude of a father for the winner at his left, seldom left his plate empty, and never his glass. The result was that the winner in question became rapidly tipsy, and finally horribly drunk. The whole thing developed into an orgy. When our friend Largeval saw Marnaz-Lagoy put the lighted end of his cigar into his mouth, he thought that the time had come for conclusive measures, and poured out a large wine-glassful of brandy.

" 'What wine is that?' the winner asked with an agreeable mixing of his words.

" 'Château Yquem,' returned Largeval, as serene as moonlight.

" 'All right,' said the fool, and tossed off the brandy neat.

"He had a good head, that Marnaz-Lagoy. It didn't knock him over. He wouldn't have done much on a

tight-rope, but he could keep his feet ; for he rose, went to the window, and opened it wide, an idiotic thing to do when one is the worse for liquor. The cold air took him by the throat, of course, and toppled him over into Largeval's arms, who, dear charitable soul, had stolen up to help him. He immediately announced to Madam Siefert that his friend could not go home in such a condition, and that lady kindly placed a room at the disposition of the toper. Everybody had gone away by this time, with empty pockets but with plenty of wine. Tricart, Perlot, and I remained with Madam Siefert."

"Were there no servants?" asked the judge.

"No ; they lodged on the top story, and retired after supper. Largeval announced that his friend was too ill to be left alone ; he would remain with him. Then he addressed the hostess—

"M. Marnaz, I know, intended to present you with ten thousand francs out of his winnings. Here they are. You had better take them now, because you will probably be in bed in the morning when we go."

"Madam Siefert thanked him, and said she was going to bed ; my friends and I announced that we were going. Perlot really did go. We slipped into a cupboard, and waited until the robust snores of the lady informed us that her conscience was tranquil, and that it was time for us to look about us. We stole out on tip-toe, and got to the room where the tipsy winner of the three hundred thousand francs lay unconscious. Half of the door was glass, and Largeval had kept his candle

burning. Man is not perfect, and one never thinks of everything on these occasions. So we could see Remi performing an operation which at first we failed altogether to understand. He had poured a lot of water into a basin, and taken a white handkerchief from Marnaz-Lagoy's pocket. This he proceeded carefully to soak into the water.

" 'I don't understand it,' whispered Tricart to me.

" Nor, in truth, did I. But we had the key of the puzzle in a moment. When the handkerchief was thoroughly wet, Largeval took it in two hands by the four corners and placed it on Marnaz' face, carefully arranging the pleats about the nose and mouth. He was actually taking care of his friend, no doubt in hopes that when he woke there might be a share of the winnings for the guardian angel. It might be moral, but it wasn't interesting; and Tricart said sourly—

" 'Oh, hang it, if Largeval has become a sister of mercy, let us go.'

" Perlot was waiting for us downstairs in the street. He had imagined, heaven knows why, that we should not be long in the house. We described indifferently what had taken place, and immediately his face grew grave, and in a hushed voice he said—

" 'Well, my lads, the trick's done.'

" 'What's done?'

" 'Marnaz-Lagoy's a dead man;' and when we began exclaiming incredulously he explained, 'I have often heard of the dodge. The wet handkerchief intercepts the air, and suffocates as easily as a couple of mattresses.

If he were sober he'd wake and throw it off. As he is drunk, he sleeps like a log, and he'll never wake again.'

"I remembered that I had been drunk once or twice in Largeval's company, and I can assure you, sir, that I felt thankful to be yet in the land of the living."

XVII.

AROUSÉ from his torpor by Rouillouze's last words, George rose sharply and exclaimed—

"It is impossible, it is a foul invention ; my brother could never have been guilty of that infamy !"

"Does he not keep it up well, the humbug ?" the old man ejaculated, eyeing Largeval with some admiration and a good deal of irony.

"Largeval," M. Mestras said severely, "speak when I question you, not otherwise. You, go on."

"The remainder won't take long," continued Rouillouze. "Perlot told us all about the dodge with the wet handkerchief. It's not one of Largeval's invention. The English professionals know and use it effectively at times. The most convenient part of it is that it leaves absolutely no trace. Nobody who's not in the secret could guess that a crime had been committed. Of course, you understand that our feelings towards Largeval were not warmly, friendly after this ; we were deucedly jealous, in fact. He had left us out of a good thing. If what Perlot said was right, he would just strip the body at his ease, and that was three hundred thousand francs in his own pocket."

"Can you name the sum exactly ?" asked M. Mestras.

"Not exactly ; but it's easily got at. Deduct the ten thousand francs given to Madam Siefert, and he would have left about two hundred and eighty-five thousand francs."

"That would agree with our information," remarked the Judge d'Instruction: "two hundred and fifty thousand francs for the annuity, three or four thousand were spent immediately, and thirty thousand were found in the cellar."

George wiped his forehead ; he was suffering a double torture, for his brother and in his own person.

"What followed, Rouillouze?"

"We resolved to wait for Largeval. At about seven o'clock he appeared. We went straight towards him, and he made an odd grimace when he saw us.

" ' We go shares ! ' said Tricart to him.

"He went through the usual comedy, pretended infinite astonishment, wanted to know what we meant, and when we had told him, denied obstinately, as you have heard him.

" ' You're padded with bank-notes,' said Tricart ; ' don't try to swindle us.' "

"And when we had proved to his satisfaction that his fate was entirely in our hands, he gave in and allowed everything."

"And it was then," M. Mestras put in, "that you concluded the convention by which you could claim a certain sum from him now and then."

"Every six months he was to give five hundred francs to each of us."

"How is it that you did not extort more?"

"Because he made a desperate resistance at first, and we shouldn't have got anything for denouncing him. It was pleasant enough to be able to count upon a thousand francs a year. A denunciation might avenge the dead, about whom we didn't care a stiver, but it brought nothing to us, about whom we cared a good deal."

"Why did Tricart and Perlot sign receipts, while you never did?"

"Because Largeval knew a lot about them, and compelled them, while I had nothing against me."

"That is to say, nothing against you that he knew or could use," the magistrate suggested.

Rouillouze's only response was a slow whistle and a mocking glance at George. The Judge d'Instruction knew perfectly well how to interpret this answer; and went on quietly—

"The body of Marnaz-Lagoy was found the next day, but murder at first was not suspected. Madam Siefert was arrested, but there was not a tittle of evidence against her, and finally the matter was forgotten, or at any rate put aside as inscrutable. That is it, is it not so, Largeval?"

George was plunged in painful thought when the magistrate spoke to him. He started as from a dream, but answered nothing.

"And now, Largeval, perhaps you will tell us the real name of the man whom you murdered?"

The question was put simply, in the matter of fact tone of a man asking a date.

"But I have killed nobody, sir," returned the unhappy man, feeling more broken-hearted every moment; "believe me, I am speaking the truth. So I cannot answer you."

"You are still resolved not to speak? Very good. Then I can tell you that your victim's real name was Louis Dormeau."

"My wife's brother!" cried George, with an accent of such unmistakable sincerity, that the judge looked up in wonderment, and was half disposed to doubt the accuracy of his previous conclusions.

Seeing M. Mestras silent and meditative for a moment, George seized the opportunity to make a last protest—

"I have told you, sir, that I am the victim of an extraordinary combination of circumstances. I put myself under their control voluntarily, it is true; but I knew not what I was doing. It is clear that my brother was guilty, and I cannot defend him; but I will maintain my innocence, and I have suggested to you how I may be helped to prove it. I need say but a word to my wife and she will recognise her husband."

"So be it," answered the magistrate. "Madam Largeval shall be summoned for to-morrow."

XVIII.

HAVING witnessed the departure of Largeval for Mazas, Montussan perambulated the streets in a condition of painful perplexity. During the last few days he had grown to look upon George as a man full of kindness and devotion. He was ashamed of having suspected him for a moment. But what he had just seen troubled him somewhat. The law was not applied with that sudden brutality without grave deliberation on the part of the motors. Was George's apparent loyalty and benevolence a clever comedy and nothing more? Remembering all that he knew of the man, all that he imagined he had guessed, the Bohemian could not determine in his own mind that this time the police were altogether wrong.

And then his thoughts reverted to Geneviève, whom, indeed, they seldom left for long. Again she and her mother would be without resources. Montussan would do his best with his water-colour sketches, but it would be infinitely more difficult to make money by them in the open market than it was by disposing of them to a friendly buyer like George Largeval.

"The wisest thing," he concluded, "is to get the young folk married as soon as we can."

Like a prudent parent, Lucien had made every inquiry into the character and situation of young Gaston Dormeau. His reputation was excellent, he was highly esteemed by his employers, and his salary was sufficient to maintain a family. Finally it was affirmed that he must have saved money.

"What a lucky dog," the Bohemian muttered as he walked; "and I of all men to be the instrument of his happiness. Well, so be it. And since it must be done some day, why not to-day?"

There had been many a mute rebellion in Lucien's heart and brain when he pictured the union which he had nearly brought about. But he wrestled with the jealous thoughts and conquered; and it was in all sincerity that he rejoiced in being the architect of Geneviève's happiness, though another was to share it.

Another cause determined him to accompany Gaston to Madam Largeval's to-day—he would see Geneviève again. But what was to be said concerning the arrest of Largeval? The widow disliked her brother-in-law, but it was probable that his misfortune would trouble her somewhat nevertheless. "So," thought the Bohemian, "I'll tell her nothing yet."

When he reached the commercial house where Dormeau was employed, he found that the young man had been charged by his employers with a confidential mission and would not return till late, perhaps not until the following morning. The next day, having made an appointment, the Bohemian found the lover waiting for him in a frenzy of impatience. He had guessed that

Montussan's errand must have some connection with his adored Geneviève.

"Tell me quickly what is the matter," he said, seizing Montussan's hands.

"Gently, gently, my lad," the Bohemian replied with a sorrowful smile.

"Is it good or bad news? Give me an answer."

"Give a man time. There, now, I may say that it's good news. I have seen your aunt and your cousin."

"Oh, how is she?—better, well? What did she say?"

"What? Another verbal Niagara!"

"I won't say another word."

"Well, you need not freeze altogether. Mademoiselle Geneviève is quite recovered; your aunt is no longer against you, and I've persuaded her that you will make—well, a very presentable husband for her daughter. Now, take your hat and gloves, if you have got any; tell your chief that you'll not be back this evening, and come along."

"But where?"

"You are a lover, and you do not guess it? I'm ashamed of you."

"We are going to see Geneviève," cried the young man, with joy depicted on his countenance.

"I beg your pardon; we are going to see Madam Largeval to ask for her daughter's hand, which I imagine she will not refuse."

The young man caught Montussan's hand in both of his and pressed it with grateful energy.

"Now, let us be calm, young man. Just think, if any omnibus happened to be passing and you . . ."

"Ah ! but you're with me—you to whom I owe everything."

"I cannot pretend that it is exclusively for your sake that I have striven. Your beautiful cousin interests me most, and she loves you."

"She has told you so ?"

"Was it necessary after that omnibus accident ? But you're a nice fellow, stopping to talk here, when she may be waiting for you. Talk of love's wings. Ah ! if I were an accepted lover . . ."

"Have you never loved ?" the young man asked, with really friendly interest.

Montussan looked keenly at him ere he answered, and when he did it was with no bitterness in his voice.

"No, my lad ; I have never loved. But if such a catastrophe had befallen me, I think I should have been more joyous than you."

"But I cannot dance in the street. You must see in my face how happy I am."

"Of course I do ; I'm a fool. That's what it is never to have been in love."

It was Geneviève who opened the door when they reached Madam Largeval's apartments. Seeing Gaston, a burning blush overspread her face and neck, and with an ineffable gaze of gratitude she held out her hand to Montussan. He took it, but dropped it in a moment, saying in a tone that was almost harsh—

"I wish to see Madam Largeval, Mademoiselle."

Recalled to a sense of the conventionalities, Geneviève led them silently to the room where her mother sat. She rose as they entered and came towards Gaston.

"You must not bear malice, Gaston, because I have opposed you hitherto. They had told me several things that made me doubtful; and then the way in which your poor father . . . Ah! we will not speak of that. M. Montussan says that you love Geneviève sincerely."

"I love her from the bottom of my heart."

"You know that we are poor, very poor."

"I am glad that it is so, for she and you will then owe everything to me."

"You are right, Gaston," said Montussan, desperately twisting his mustache.

"Well then, Gaston, be happy with her, be good to her." And the mother turned towards Geneviève, who stood pale and trembling at her side, and added gently, "Have you nothing to say to Gaston?"

They hesitated shyly an instant; the moment afterwards they were in each other's arms, laughing and crying. A lump rose in the poor Bohemian's throat, and he coughed with artificial vehemence for some minutes. He could measure at that instant the immensity of the love which had taken root within him. While the lovers held each other's hands and gazed ardently into each other's eyes, the despair that filled his heart was almost making him exclaim: "Geneviève, I too love you, like the dolt that I am."

When the joy of the first meeting, the first licit inter-

view, had somewhat subsided, Geneviève came towards Montussan with hands outstretched—

"I do not deserve all that you have done for me, sir : to have saved my life, and then to give me . . ."

She glanced shyly at Gaston, while the Bohemian interrupted her rudely—

"Nonsense ! If you are going to begin all that over again, I shall make a speech ; I know I shall. And I am a frightfully bad hand at extempore orations, I can tell you. I am sure that everything I have done has been done out of pure selfishness, utter selfishness ; that I like to see you happy, and . . . and I think that's all, and quite enough too, don't you think so ?"

He spoke rapidly, feverishly, endeavouring to lose himself in a whirl of words. His careless bonhomie deceived nobody.

"You have been very good to us, M. Montussan, very devoted, when we had not a friend." And she crept up to him with a serious smile. "We can never thank you enough, neither my mother nor I. And—and—won't you kiss me, M. Montussan, as papa would have done to-day ?"

She lifted her forehead ; the scent of her hair came up to him. It was in him to turn and flee ; but mastering the wild beatings of his heart, hushing the thousand voices within him, he bent down and kissed her reverently, and thought himself repaid a thousandfold for his poor efforts. And then he spoke to her calmly—

"I am not used to giving paternal kisses, Geneviève. I have been a general inutility all my life, a ne'er-do-well,

an idler—worse, probably. When I saw you for the first time I understood that my life had been a mistake from beginning to end ; and having had the good luck to save you—since ‘save’ is the word you insist on—I thought I might perhaps be of some use to you afterwards, and I resolved to try. I do not know how far I have succeeded. But I know you have succeeded with me, have cured me of many things—of my old self to begin with. It is I who ought to thank you, you see, and I do so from my heart. From you to me, my child, there should be nought but pity.”

He was silent, and silence fell on all the little group. Geneviève, surprised and moved, scarcely understood clearly ; Gaston was inclined to think that his friend and benefactor was horribly prosy ; Laurence Largeval, who perhaps understood it all, buried her face in her hands, and admired the simple generosity of the self-sacrifice.

Montussan was ashamed of the effect which his words had produced.

“Aha !” he cried in the jovial tone more commonly associated with his name and person, “you did not think that I could preach a homily like that, did you ? But it was a shame to do it on a day of betrothal. Come, Gaston, I have kissed one betrothed ; let me congratulate the other.” And he shook the young man heartily by the hand.

Geneviève had not understood everything, but her woman’s instinct told her that Montussan’s sorrow, whatever it was, was a sorrow which a woman had caused.

There was that in his voice which said as much to all women. She stole up to him in silence and half whispered—

“I will not pity you, but I will pray for you.”

“What! did you think the careless artist, the Bohemian buffoon, in earnest?”

“I knew you were. You could not deceive me,” she said.

XIX.

THE situation had become embarrassing, and everybody felt relieved when the bell rang in the antechamber. Laurence opened the door. A man who presented a piece of stamped paper asked—

“Does Madam Largeval live here?”

“I am Madam Largeval.”

“I have to serve you with this summons.”

“A summons!—for what?”

“To appear before M. Mestras, Judge d’Instruction.”

Reading no newspaper, and knowing nothing of the popular crime of the day, Madam Largeval conceived that she herself must be accused of some mysterious misdeed, and it was with a hand tremulous with nervous apprehension that she bore the official paper into the room where Montussan and the lovers were seated.

“Mother, what is it?” exclaimed Geneviève, startled by her mother’s pallor.

Laurence explained the reason for her fright, and Montussan immediately understood that Laurence was called as a witness in the Largeval case.

“Madam,” he said immediately, “I was perhaps wrong not to tell you of an event which nearly concerns

you. You need have no fear. You are summoned to the Palace of Justice as a witness, that is all."

"A witness!" echoed mother and daughter simultaneously.

"You are perhaps the only persons in Paris who are not acquainted with the circumstances under which your brother-in-law, M. Remi Largeval, has been . . ."

"What has happened to him?"

"Has been arrested, and taken to Mazas."

"My uncle!" cried Geneviève aghast.

"What is the charge against him?" asked Laurence more coolly.

"I scarcely dare say—it is very serious."

"Oh, never mind! I think M. Remi is capable of anything."

"He is accused of murder."

In spite of the words which she had just uttered, Madam Largeval was overwhelmed by this answer.

"Of murder!" she repeated.

"Aye, unfortunately, Madam. Two men were found dead in his cellar. The first day it was thought that they were thieves who had entered the house in order to rob him."

"And the second day?"

"On the second day weighty evidence had probably been found against him, for he was arrested before my eyes."

"You were there, and you told us nothing?"

"I was loath to distress you, Madam. I knew that

you do not profess much affection for this relative, but I imagined that you would be sorry to hear that your husband's name was being bandied about the criminal courts."

"It does affect me grievously, I assure you. But what was his attitude when arrested?"

"The attitude of an innocent man. I imagine there must be an error somewhere, and that after hearing a few witnesses, and you among them, they will set M. Largeval at liberty."

"I never heard of the crime of which they pretend he is guilty," said Laurence, after reflecting a minute or two.

"Do not let that trouble you," the Bohemian replied. "They will probably ask you one or two questions; all you need do is to answer them according to your conscience."

"You say that you thought him innocent?"

"Aye, Madam; he is guiltless, or I am very much deceived. For an instant, it is true, I did suspect him."

"Ah! indeed."

"Yes, but when I observed his fine frank eyes, his . . ."

"Frank! he? Ah! M. Montussan, you are very clever, you talk well, you have experience and penetration; but this time you are grossly deceived. M. Remi is neither frank nor loyal; he is not even commonly, vulgarly honest, in the plainest sense of the word. I do not say that he is capable of murder. I do not know all the facts; and I would not condemn my most cruel

enemy on a mere supposition. Only he has lived such a life, that if there were some awful misdeed in his past I should not be surprised."

Montussan listened attentively to the bitter words. Remembering what he had thought on the evening of the two convicts' disappearance, he began to argue with himself that Laurence was the sister-in-law of the accused man, and would not speak thus without excellent reasons. But he would probably be summoned himself, and the magistrate's questions would help him to form a better opinion.

"Can I be of any service to you at the Palace of Justice," he asked.

"No, I thank you. But I will ask you to see me for a short time at four o'clock, so that I may have your advice if anything extraordinary has occurred."

Montussan promised, and, before going, shook hands with Gaston. The young man appeared to have lost the freshness and frankness of an hour ago, and was stiff and somewhat awkward.

"What is the matter with you?" said Montussan abruptly.

"With me? Nothing. I was thinking of this astounding story. Is it not odd that we should hear it on the very day I am betrothed to the niece of the accused man?"

Montussan plunged his gaze into the young man's eyes. He thought he could detect a second thought hidden behind the expressed one, a reserve that set him thinking.

"That would be a little too strong," he said half aloud, and went downstairs in a bitter humour.

He had an inkling that Gaston would not remain long behind him, and, effectively, five minutes after his departure the young man left the house, his face grave, his brow overcharged.

"Is that whipper-snapper going to jilt Geneviève under the pretext that she has an uncle who is not everything that he ought to be? I should like to see it!" And grumbling in this fashion, Montussan walked to Riaux's studio.

Madam Largeval went to the Palace of Justice the next morning with a fearful sense of the responsibility weighing on her. On her testimony, perhaps, might depend the life of the man whom she hated with all her heart and soul. Arrived at the long gallery, an usher examined her summons, and informing her that M. Mestras was waiting, promptly showed her into the Judge d'Instruction's room.

Having asked her the usual formal questions as to her name, profession, and age, M. Mestras said gently—

"You are doubtless aware of the fact that M. Largeval is accused of a capital crime?"

"I have known it since yesterday," she answered with a tremulous voice.

"You will see him here in a few minutes. He has requested to be confronted with you."

"I am ready, sir."

"But before that, it is my duty to put one or two somewhat delicate questions to you. You had a brother,

I believe, Madam, and he died under somewhat mysterious circumstances?"

"My brother was found dead in a house of doubtful reputation, where gaming was the custom, I am told."

"And his death ruined you—he being a small banker, and in possession of your inheritance?"

"That is so, sir."

"Madam, I must tell you that your brother was murdered, and that his murderer was Remi Largeval."

"Remi! Remi!" she cried. "Are you not mistaken?"

"I am afraid not, Madam. To convince you, listen to this testimony of an eye-witness;" and M. Mestras slowly read Rouillouze's deposition.

At the same instant that Laurence uttered a cry of horror, the Judge d'Instruction gave the order, "Send in Largeval."

A side door opened and George entered, pale, but resolute in air and attitude.

"This is the lady whom you wished to meet, is it not, Largeval?" said the magistrate.

"It is; and I thank you for having called her," returned George; and advancing two or three steps, he said, his voice, his attitude one anxious appeal—

"Laurence, dear Laurence, look at me, look well at me . . ."

"Hush! oh, hush!" cried the wife with passionate indignation.

"Prisoner," said M. Mestras, "you must not speak until I authorise you."

"But don't you see, sir, that she does not recognise me yet; that I must speak to her to make myself known?"

"Silence, Largeval; you must await my bidding."

"Be quick then, sir, I conjure you."

The voice stirred every fibre in Laurence's being. It was George's voice, it was George's face; but not for an instant did she doubt that they belonged to the treacherous brother, the depth of whose villany she was peculiarly fitted to gauge. The Judge d'Instruction turned towards her.

"Madam, you have been called as a witness, and I understand how painful you must feel your position."

"It is very painful indeed, sir. The man before you bears the name of a dear husband with whom I have spent twenty happy years. I have no esteem or affection for him, but I should be sorry to contribute to his downfall by any word or act of mine."

"There is a higher interest involved, Madam, than even your regard for your dead husband. The prisoner defended himself with surprising ingenuity before the Commissary of Police; but yesterday, however, he was compelled to allow that the evidence against him is terribly heavy."

"And you are certain that M. Remi . . ."

"Laurence, Laurence! wait before you judge me."

Twice Largeval had used the familiar and endearing pronoun 'thou' in addressing his wife. Each time a blush of shame or indignation had leapt to her cheeks and forehead, and she protested warmly—

"Tell him not to say 'thou' in speaking to me, sir."

"Why not?"

"It reminds me of another day—the only time when he dared speak to me as he is speaking now."

Tranquilly and methodically M. Mestras explained—

"This familiarity, Madam, is part of the character which Largeval has adopted. He declared yesterday that he is not Remi, but your husband, George."

"He George! This is monstrous! I held my poor George in my arms, sir, dead—aye, dead beyond doubt—at that man's house, and he had not a tear in his eye, not a sob in his voice."

"Then you do not recognise him as your husband?"

"No, no, a thousand times no." And after a pause she added with furious energy, "He thought that I might consent to save him, to corroborate his lie. But he is mistaken; I have suffered too much through him, and I think that I should hardly stretch forth a finger to save him from the scaffold."

"In what way can he have injured you, Madam?"

Her eyes fell. It was patent that she regretted her haste and the openness of her speech. George on his part had fallen into the stupor of astonishment and dismay which had characterised his demeanour during the greater part of the inquiry. Eight days ago he would have given much to know the cause of Laurence's hatred of his brother; now he shuddered, foreboding that a misfortune greater than all others was about to be

revealed to him. Madam Largeval answered nothing. With gentle courtesy the magistrate insisted—

“Madam, I asked you what was your grievance against your brother-in-law.”

“I cannot say it, sir; do not ask me.”

“The law asks you, Madam; the law requires an answer, painful as it may be to you to give one.”

Feebly and faintly defending herself, she said—

“But supposing that my evidence has nothing to do with the question at issue?”

“It is not for you to judge of the relative importance of your evidence. I ask for that evidence, and myself will estimate it at its real value. As I told you, Largeval began by explaining all that has happened in his house in a fairly reasonable and logical way; but the testimony against him grew stronger, and he saw himself at last encompassed by a chain of damning proofs. An old accomplice of his has divulged the secret of that infamous crime committed by him seven or eight years ago. Seeing that it was useless to deny the crime, he changed his tactics and allowed Remi to be guilty, but protested that he was not Remi. He added that one word from him would convince you of the fact.”

“Let him say the word,” Laurence replied with calm disdain.

A ray of hope illumined the mental darkness in which Largeval had been stagnating; but when he came to seek for some incident, some word which should be only known to his wife and himself, he found that in his

confusion he could catch at nothing. Laurence's outspoken contempt, and worse, her hints, had thoroughly unhinged a mind which the swift succession of extraordinary events of the past month had cast into chaotic bewilderment.

"Say what you want to say, Largeval," the magistrate said slowly.

"Wait, wait! I'm thinking," Largeval hastened to answer, desperately endeavouring to collect his thoughts. "Laurence, dear Laurence . . . well, I will not call you that if it angers you . . . Do you not remember . . . Gracious Heaven! I remember nothing! Sir, you see how troubled, how excited I am. This cannot last for ever; I must be better soon—wait, sir. Laurence, if you condemn me now, a whole lifetime of remorse will not expiate your mistake."

"Come, Largeval, this is no proof; you are trifling with us. Supposing—a thing I do not admit—that your wife could have met you three or four times without recognising you, can you ask me to believe that she can be mistaken now—now that we have told her your plea, your pretension?"

"I see it all, sir; I am an unfortunate wretch. I can find nothing to say to her; but give me time—time is all I want."

"Largeval, this is scarcely sane. Can you ask me to believe that you need long reflection before you can find a decisive word to say to your wife?"

George understood that the judge was right, but nevertheless he found it impossible to co-ordinate his ideas.

"I will not keep you long now, Madam," the judge said, turning to Laurence; "there can be no doubt as to the identity of the accused."

"None, sir. This man is unmistakably Remi, my poor husband's unworthy brother."

"But," the judge added, "I put a question to you, and I must insist upon an answer. I must know the reason of your antipathy to your brother-in-law. You will pardon my persistence; my duty compels me to press you."

"Oh, sir! if you could spare me this!" exclaimed Laurence with a gesture of supplication.

"I cannot, Madam; and, believe me, I regret that it is beyond my power."

In a low, hesitating voice Laurence told her story.

"Remi has tried to take my husband's place before."

"Remi!" cried George sharply and suddenly.

Laurence turned on him astonished, almost doubting for an instant. Then resuming her former contemptuous attitude she went on—

"It is now nearly twelve years ago. For some months he had been importuning me with his attentions, seeking by persuasion, even by threats, to betray his brother. I dared not tell George, fearing that his rash rage would lead him to commit some irremediable deed. One night when my husband was away and my child asleep in bed, Remi came, forced his way into the room where I sat working, and proposed that I should leave my home with him, that he should take my husband's

place, saying, sir, that he could bribe George to consent to the substitution."

At this disclosure George's strength came back to him in a torrent of hot blood, as it were, and loudly, with inexpressible scorn and horror in his voice, he exclaimed—

"Remi did that, the infamous villain!"

Laurence looked dazed. His eyes glared, his mouth foamed. Then with a ringing shriek she recognised her husband.

"George! George! Sir, it is George!"

XX.

THE pain and fury in Largeval's exclamation proclaimed his identity in a fashion that to his wife was at once conclusive. Jealousy like that he had just betrayed could not be simulated. Laurence held out her arms appealingly to M. Mestras. The happiness of finding George living was neutralised by the fact that she found him in serious danger. The entire scene was enacted in a minute. While the magistrate sat confounded by the suddenness of the change, Laurence flew to her husband, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him repeatedly, babbling incoherently as she did so—

"It is you, it is you, George. They accuse you of an awful crime. Oh, I am so happy now! And you wanted to get money for us! Foolish fellow! It was wicked of you, George. But I do not care now; you're here, you're living, you're innocent. Remi did it all, the monster! But you, you have the kindest heart in the world!"

Largeval remained grave, even stern. He had been stricken to the heart, and for the time being felt careless as to whether men held him blameless or steeped in sin. His brother had deceived him, betrayed his trust in the basest way; his brother had plotted against his honour,

sought to become his rival in his wife's affections. He thought of it all with a bitter, burning, jealous feeling, and he could not smile in answer to Laurence's caresses. She had well-nigh forgotten the incident which she had just related in her delight at recovering her husband. Seeing at last that he bent his head and that the tears were welling in his eyes, she drew back a little and reproached him with soft words—

"It was not my fault, George. Do not think about it. Remi was a bad man; but his worthless love should not be between us now."

George knew well that his wife was blameless; but his was a somewhat frail, susceptible nature, and that his brother should have dared speak of love to his wife was an insult, a humiliation which he felt none the less keenly that the insulter was dead. He bowed his head acknowledging that she was right, and immediately fell into his former attitude of prostration.

Laurence's thoughts were in the future, not in the past. She was longing to have him at her side, free, and under the influence of her ministrations in a fair way to forget all the evil that had befallen him.

"Sir," she said, turning to the Judge d'Instruction, "you heard me? That cry came from my heart and must have convinced you."

"So this is really your husband—George Largeval?"

"Without a doubt. I could not continue long in my error. My hatred of his brother blinded me. If you had not made me avow the reason of the hatred, I might have sealed my poor husband's fate in my anxiety to see justice done to Remi."

"I am willing to trust you, Madam," the judge said gravely; "but you will acknowledge that your abrupt change is surprising, to say the least of it."

"Is it possible that you do not believe me, sir? What testimony do you want? George must remember many private matters that Remi could not know. Try us; we will convince you in a few minutes."

"I shall require other evidence than yours, Madam."

"Can anybody know him as I know him?"

Laurence spoke with extraordinary volubility. In her simplicity she regarded the question of identity as settled, and imagined that M. Mestras could not refuse to let her husband depart with her. The magistrate listened to her, and debated within himself. He had no wish to prove Largeval guilty, and he half conceded the fact that the prisoner might indeed have taken counsel with his poverty and stepped into his brother's comfortable position, tempted partly by the facility afforded by the similitude existing between the twins. Madam Largeval, too, appeared to him sincerity itself. There was no trace of falsehood in her look, in her voice, in her attitude, ever since she had entered the room. Her cry, "It is George! it is my husband!" had been magnificently spontaneous.

And yet M. Mestras hesitated. He could not feel convinced that this was not one of the most cunning conspiracies ever hatched for the bewilderment of an unfortunate magistrate. He had constantly before his eyes the fear of appearing a dupe. What was there to prove that Laurence had not learned her part long

beforehand? The prisoner had denied strenuously as long as he saw no proof against him; directly the evidence became overwhelming, he turned round cleverly and accused himself of personating his brother. And then he asked to be confronted with his wife. If it was a comedy they were playing, the acting was perfect. Having all this in mind, he resolved to wait two or three days before forming an opinion; there were other witnesses to question—Pascalín and Gaston Dormeau, for instance. Turning politely to Madam Largeval, he said—

“Madam, I will not detain you any longer.”

“I am to go . . . alone?” exclaimed the wife in consternation.

“Certainly; but you may take comfort from the assurance that your evidence has not been at all unfavourable to the prisoner.”

“What, sir? After what I have told you, you are not going to set him at liberty?”

“Assuredly not, Madam.”

“Do you charge me with falsehood, then? Do you still think that he is guilty of all these monstrous crimes?”

“I do not say that; but matters cannot be arranged in the expeditious way which you imagine. You forget that the prisoner has himself confessed that he appropriated his brother’s annuity.”

“Well?”

“Well, he is guilty of theft, at any rate.”

“Theft—George! It is not true.”

“Be good enough to reflect a moment. He appro-

priated to his own uses a sum of money that did not belong to him."

That was not Laurence's view of justice.

"But he was his brother's heir," she persisted.

"Madam, heir or not, he had no right to an annuity which was to stop at your brother-in-law's death. Supposing Remi to be really dead, whoever touched a penny of an annuity that had necessarily expired would be convicted of theft in any country in the world. Moreover, George Largeval signed his brother's name at the offices of the *Charity Insurance Company*."

"Dreadful! dreadful!" wailed Laurence, who began to understand.

Dumb and desolate, George scarcely heeded anything that was going on around him.

"One of two things, Madam," the judge pursued deliberately. "Either the prisoner is Remi Largeval, in which case he is probably guilty of three murders—that of your brother being the first . . ."

"Oh, you know, sir, that that is not so!"

"Or else he is George Largeval, and by his own admission a forger and a thief."

"Oh, what horrible names!" cried the unhappy woman. "George, don't you hear? defend yourself!"

"And I do not see what can save him from a severe sentence."

"You, sir, you," pleaded Laurence. "You are merciful; one word from you would save him."

"And even that disposed of, there are other circumstances that require some elucidation."

"What else?" exclaimed Laurence, with passionate disdain; "some new invention of the police."

"Let me advise you, Madam, not to give way to unjust anger. The judicial authorities have no right to dismiss an accused person without being satisfied that no crime or misdemeanour can be proved against him. Admitting that this is George Largeval, we know that he profited largely by his brother's death—caused, he says, by an attack of apoplexy."

"He says! it is quite true."

"You probably know that the servants had been sent away the day before, and that the brothers were quite alone."

"What do you conclude?"

"That George may have murdered his brother Remi," the magistrate returned tranquilly.

Largeval leapt from his seat. The cold words had stung him out of his apathy. A deep blush of violent indignation suffused his face.

"This—this is something new," he cried.

"It is wanton cruelty, that's what it is!" exclaimed Laurence, heavy sobs half choking her.

"This is too much," Largeval said slowly; "I cannot bear it much longer. I am tired of being the plaything of this long succession of misfortunes. Do what you like with me. I shall answer no more. Wherever I turn, there seems to be a scaffold fronting me."

"But his innocence is easily proved. Let Remi's remains be examined. You do not kill men and women by breathing on them."

The clerk had been observing Laurence attentively, and smiled. Turning fiercely on him, she cried—

“So you think a man’s life a subject for the laughter of a hireling pettifogger . . .”

The magistrate intervened immediately :

“I will reprimand my clerk, if you please.”

“Very well. Then, I say, let Remi Largeval’s body be exhumed. There are always some traces left of a violent death. Let the doctors decide if my poor George is guilty, since the magistrates cannot.”

XXI.

M. MESTRAS listened to Laurence with sympathetic attention; won over, in spite of himself, by the very fierceness of her defence.

"So be quick," she continued. "Order the autopsy of Remi Largeval. If no wound or traces of poison are discovered, you must acknowledge that George is innocent."

The magistrate answered calmly—

"There are ways of killing that leave no traces, Madam."

"Well, in that case you can do nothing," said Largeval quickly, not counting the effect which his words might have.

M. Mestras heard them, and looked up quickly, studying Laurence lengthily, seeing in her face that she fully perceived how rash and clumsy her husband had been.

"Listen a moment without interrupting me, if you can, Madam Largeval. George Largeval, since we adopt the hypothesis that the accused is really your husband . . ."

"I should think so. Everybody must admit that now."

"George Largeval loses his situation in the morning,

owing to the failure of M. Roulleau. Your resources were exhausted."

"Why should I deny it?"

"And, moreover, your daughter had just met with a serious accident on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and was likely to be an invalid for a month. Largeval, whose affection for you and your daughter is intense, loses his head and hurries off to his brother, bent on asking him for money. Who knows what Remi's answer was?"

George broke in impetuously—

"Oh, you need not cast about for proofs of my guilt. I shall deny nothing. Put all Remi's misdeeds on my shoulders, it is all one. You must condemn me somehow."

"Ah, but I am here, and I will not allow that!" cried Laurence. "You are innocent, and we shall prove it."

"That night," M. Mestras went on patiently, "there was nobody save the two brothers in the isolated cottage occupied by Remi Largeval. In that solitude a terrible drama may have been enacted. Seeing evidences of his brother's prosperity on every side, being refused, perhaps, a pittance from his plenty, George may have conceived the idea of ridding himself once for all of Remi, and of taking his place, living on his money. Who could see him? Nobody. Who could expose him? Not a living soul. I do not say that this is the true account of what happened in the Rue Serpente, but it is at least a possible explanation."

"What a wicked imagination it must be that invents such things!" cried Laurence, ingenuous in her distress.

"Madam," M. Mestras observed, "I will not detain you any longer."

"Oh, if you had only known my husband before!" she exclaimed, without noticing his hint, "you could never have thought him guilty of . . ."

"I have said nothing positive. I have indicated what was possible—probable, even."

"If he had only come to me, and said—'Listen, this is what I want to do,' there could have been no question of . . ."

"Your examination is at an end, Madam," reiterated the magistrate with somewhat sterner significance. "I am going to order the prisoner to be removed."

"No, no," persisted Laurence; "and besides there is a question you have not yet decided—that of the exhumation. Experts must see the body and say that the death was a natural one, that George had no hand in it."

"That, of course, cannot be refused to you. Tomorrow the doctors and analysts will begin their work."

Laurence exhaled a sigh of profound relief.

"Gendarme," said the magistrate, "take the prisoner back to Mazas."

"Sir!" began Laurence, with a gesture of supplication.

"What more do you desire?" said M. Mestras impatiently.

"Let . . . let me kiss him before they take him away," said Laurence timidly.

M. Mestras was essentially a man of kindly disposition. He nodded, and husband and wife were in each

other's arms; Laurence eager and excited, George more phlegmatic, and half dazed by successive disasters. But the touch of his wife's lips on his cheek dispelled his sombre reverie for the time being, and he took her in his arms, and embraced her with all the tenderness of old days. But his love was mute, unlike that of Laurence, who poured forth a hundred passionate suggestions and loving encouragements. The scene was poignant, and M. Mestras felt its pathos acutely. All doubts as to Laurence's honesty in the recognition of Largeval left him, and he began to seek in his own mind for some means of saving the prisoner whom it was his duty to accuse. The means were difficult, if they existed; and he could find but one vague word to say to the suffering wife—

“Hope.”

Then he formally ordered the prisoner to be removed. George left the room with his custodian, apparently calm, in reality prostrated. M. Mestras was compelled to request Madam Largeval to retire, a request she obeyed, whilst she cast a look of sorrowful supplication on the magistrate. In the corridor were several persons whom she knew, but she recognised nobody until Gaston Dor-meu approached her.

“My poor aunt!” he exclaimed, taking both her hands in his.

“You here!” she cried. “Ah yes! of course. There is cruel news awaiting you, Gaston. But ask me nothing,” she added; “it is all too horrible. Come and see us when you are at liberty.”

Then scarcely listening to his promise, she threw herself, weeping, into his arms.

"Oh, if you only knew, if you only knew, my poor boy!"

A violent hysterical attack supervened, and arrested the questions which Gaston was about to put. Hearing her cries, M. Mestras left his office, and gave orders to the effect that great care should be taken of her; and half an hour afterwards Laurence was able to leave the Palace of Justice, calm and collected, but very weak through faintness.

Montussan had kept his appointment only too punctually. An hour before the time indicated he reached Madam Largeval's door; and there he stopped. Geneviève would be alone, he remembered; and he dared not trust himself alone with her. Words he had vowed never to speak, and to think of as seldom as he could, would come forth, and for the brief delirium of that solitary meeting he would sacrifice all possible meetings to come. There is method even in lovers' madness, and he, therefore, remained pacing the street until such time as Madam Largeval should return home. The waiting was longer than he had anticipated. Laurence had been nearly four hours in M. Mestras's office, and after that, her faintness had retarded her. Some hours later than the appointed time, Madam Largeval appeared; but so pale, so feeble, that Lucien, when he saw her, ran towards her, with arms extended.

"Madam! Madam!" he cried, "you are ill. What has happened?"

"Come—come," was all the answer she vouchsafed ; and walking with a feverish haste whereof nobody would have thought her capable, she reached home some minutes before Montussan could overtake her. The door was scarcely opened when she took Geneviève into her arms, exclaiming between her sobs—

"It is your father . . . your father !"

Montussan stared at her blankly, and then his eyes met Geneviève's, and the two glances said plainly that daughter and friend had the same thought—that Laurence's mind had become unhinged, and that her words were a meaningless raving.

"My father !" repeated Geneviève, wondering, but yet in a soothing tone. "Be calm, mother, and then you will be able to tell us everything."

"Everything ! I tell you that I have seen your father."

And sobbing more violently than ever, Laurence hid her face in her daughter's bosom. Geneviève signed to Montussan, who drew forward an arm-chair, and with gentle pressure and persuasion Geneviève compelled her mother to sit down. Kneeling before her, she endeavoured with caressing words to win her mother back to reason.

"Mother, dear, be yourself again. Something must have terrified you ; tell us what it was."

"She cannot understand," murmured the mother ; and Montussan motioning to Geneviève that it would be more prudent to allow her to continue, she went on—
"Ah, who could understand ? who could conceive such a succession of disasters ?"

"But what disasters, Madam?" Montussan inquired, beginning to see that these were not the heated fancies of a mad woman.

"Oh, you are still there, M. Lucien. I thank you. The news that I have to tell my daughter is so extraordinary, so bewildering, so cruel, that I am near to renouncing all faith, to cursing heaven and earth . . ."

"Madam . . . Madam!" protested the Bohemian, with infinite gentleness.

"Well, sir," the tortured woman returned, in an outburst of passion, "can you tell me why it is that certain men and women, nearly always the most innocent, should be singled out all their lives as targets for misfortune's hardest blows? Can you tell me that? Can you say how it is that wicked women and dishonourable men thrive and die, if not happy, at least prosperous, while others who are blameless and stainless starve, and cannot touch pure gold without turning it to pewter?"

The philosophy was not profound, but such as it was, Montussan was glad of it, because it diverted Laurence's thoughts from her personal and immediate troubles.

"Who can explain it?" he returned. "But you are right. There are people who seem destined to be the sport of every evil chance. The planets would drop out of their orbits before such unhappy victims could succeed in anything they undertook."

With a gentle gesture Laurence put her daughter away. She spoke tranquilly, soberly; her passion spent, she felt more calm.

"You can have no idea of the appalling revelations of to-day. The prisoner,—he is yet a prisoner,—the man accused of killing two men—the man perhaps fated to die under the guillotine . . ."

"Is my uncle Remi," interrupted Geneviève.

"Is your father!" cried Laurence; "your father, my husband; I recognised him."

Geneviève knelt, gazing at her mother in dazed distress. Montussan began, gently argumentative—

"Of course, we did not understand you at first, Madam. The Largeval at Mazas is . . ."

"Is George Largeval!" cried Laurence, with more than the usual irritation of being misunderstood; "the victim of evil fortune all through life, whom, at last, persistent failure has driven to commit a folly that may bring him to a felon's grave."

Both began, darkly, to understand that these were not the ravings of a woman distraught.

"Try and explain, Madam," said Montussan, with encouraging quietude.

"This is all I know—it was not my husband who died that night in the Rue Serpente; it was Remi Largeval."

And with many breaks, and in a fitful and feverish fashion that was painfully trying to the anxious listeners, Laurence recounted the story which she had heard from M. Mestras.

"I think I see it all," cried Montussan, who divined the truth some time before she had completed her narrative. "I remember that I thought he was your husband when he came to see me at Riaux's, though"

—and here he blushed—“it was under somewhat exceptional circumstances; there was a darkness, a cruelty in Remi's eyes that . . .”

“And I—and I had half-glimpses of the truth,” exclaimed Laurence, “but I dared not trust my instinct, I knew the resemblance to be so miraculous! Ah! and you remember, Geneviève dear, when your father had obtained his brother's money and came to us with his thousand francs, we cast him off—how he must have suffered, poor fellow!”

Geneviève was dreaming^{*} wildly. After a moment's thought, Montussan said slowly—

“I think that I could reconstruct the entire story.”

“Not a difficult task,” Laurence said bitterly. “Remi was an irreclaimable—a ruthless villain!”

“And his two accomplices were the men whom we followed. He let them in, he concealed them; he exhibited that firm presence of mind when we called him up. And when Remi died, they remained in the cellar, a cruel fate condemning them to die of starvation!”

“Yes, yes; it must have happened thus.”

“Your husband, knowing nothing about this, slept soundly, happy, no doubt, in the idea that he had found a way of helping you, for I may tell you that now; his one thought, his one object, was to minister to your comfort. He bought the pictures which I pretended to find underneath your engravings.”

“Poor, poor George!” the wife murmured.

“How good you have been,” the daughter said, guessing more than the Bohemian explained.

"At last one day, attracted by the thirty thousand francs, he resolved to explore the cellar. The men were dead—and here it is that the police are most at fault; in open day he unlocks the fatal door, sends for everybody—constables included—makes public everything!"

"Ah! but they will not believe him!"

"But, mamma, he has said who he is."

"Yes; and sent for me; but in my blind hatred of the man whom he pretended to be, I could not—I would not recognise him."

"You accused him, on the contrary."

"I did! I did! And he wanted to remember something that should be known but to us two, and in his agony—my poor George!—his memory failed him. And, after all, why should he prove his identity?" she added hopelessly.

"For every imaginable reason, Madam," returned Montussan, astonished.

"Ah! you know not what the judge said, even when he had consented to suppose that George was himself."

"What did he say?"

"He said that if Largeval was not the murderer of two persons, he was at least the despoiler of one."

"I did not think of that," murmured Montussan, seeing the extent of the danger.

"I heard my husband called thief and forger, and I did not die of horror!"

Geneviève fell back on her chair, her face hidden in her hands.

"Thief and forger!" the mother repeated with frantic emphasis.

"I am afraid that these hard words are strictly applicable for the nonce," said Montussan, "but no court, knowing all the circumstances, would dare to condemn M. George Largeval."

"Ah! but you do not yet know all," Laurence exclaimed.

"Knowing the temptation—the position your husband was in on the fatal night—any court would be merciful, and impose the lightest penalty."

"But I say that you do not know all," repeated the wife.

"What more can there be?" questioned Geneviève, appalled.

"This; they would make light of the first charge to accuse him of fratricide."

The listeners emitted a simultaneous cry of horror.

"The judge imagines that George may have killed his brother, with the idea of substituting himself for his victim. Oh! you cannot imagine how I have been tortured by that man who wished me no harm—wished only to do his duty!"

"It is all too cruel, too cruel!" sobbed Geneviève; and listening in his helplessness, Lucien felt his heart wrung at every sound.

What scheme of preservation could he put forth? what consolation could he offer? Timidly, after seeking in silence, he suggested the exhumation of Remi Largeval.

"It is ordered," said Laurence, "but I place little

faith in its results. That M. Mestras seems too thoroughly convinced of George's guilt."

"Do not believe it," the Bohemian hastened to say; "they will have a post-mortem examination. And—and has your husband got counsel?"

"How should I know? I have had time to think of nothing save his peril."

"Well, he must have counsel immediately. I know a clever lawyer who would be glad to take his case, and who would make the best of it, I can assure you."

"We can never, never repay you," said Geneviève, with grateful emotion.

"Never mind about that; besides, you can—one day—when M. Largeval is restored to you."

Laurence shook her head, hoping nothing.

"Then you can repay me amply, if you will, by just thinking of me as . . . as a friend."

"You are that now; the best, the surest," Geneviève said through her tears. "If everybody—everybody, sir, were as faithful as you!"

"You have no doubt of—of any one?" Lucien asked, his own fears reflecting hers.

"I am afraid that there is every reason to doubt," said Geneviève, with pathetic resignation.

"You think that Gaston would be base—brutal enough to withdraw his support, his consolation, in your trouble?"

"Ah! sir, if it were so, could I blame him?"

"You should loathe—despise him," cried Montussan with savage energy.

"Why? The Largeval who is prisoner is either my uncle Remi, and I am the niece of an assassin—Gaston thought of it all yesterday—you must have noticed as much."

"No; I think not," protested Montussan in some embarrassment.

"Or else they will say that it is my father," she continued calmly; "and then his wife would be the daughter of a . . . I cannot say the cruel words."

"Does he not love you then?" Montussan asked.

"Yes; he loves me. It will hurt him, I am sure; but he will not dare brave the opinion of the world."

"The world's opinion!—he would give that miserable reason!"

"It is even my duty to free him from his promise. Who could hold him to it after what has happened?"

Montussan's heart leapt, and a thought of infinite joy came to his mind. Suddenly a barrier was broken, and he felt himself to be nearer the girl he loved. He was still the shameful, aimless vagabond, but, nevertheless, she did not seem so utterly unattainable. Unwon, she was to be won; there was a possibility, if not a hope. If Gaston returned not, the slow process of familiar friendship might make her his wife. His wife! He started guiltily at the thought. Fate might deal so hardly with them—be so good to him—that even the reckless Bohemian would do the Largevals an honour in marrying the daughter of their disgraced house. He would not hesitate. In his momentary egotism he became unconsciously cruel, and caught himself longing

for the condemnation of Largeval—George or Remi, he cared not.

There came such an expression of sudden joy in his eyes, that Geneviève asked him with trembling hope—

“What is it? Have you found a way to save my father?”

“No, unhappily; but I cannot believe that Gaston will not return.”

“Gaston,” repeated Laurence, who had heard none of the preceding words; “Ah! I remember, he also was called as witness. They have told him of his father’s murder by this time. He said that he would come. He told you so yesterday, Geneviève.”

“He promised, mother, and he will come,” the girl said in a broken voice.

“If that last consolation is denied us, I know not what I shall do, my darling!”

And Geneviève answered in a low constrained voice—

“I know that I shall die!”

From the movement of her lips, rather than from her utterance, Lucien gathered her melancholy meaning. His mad joy, his glad hopes fell immediately; he saw the truth.

“How she loves him!” he thought. “It would kill her, indeed. And never, never could she guess half my madness—that I would gladly die to call her my wife but for one day, one hour. There, there; it is another folly to put away, that is all!”

XXII.

THE conversation fell. A silence, full of bitter thoughts, weighed on the three occupants of the little drawing-room. In spite of all that she had heard, all that she had said, Geneviève had not lost every hope. Who ever loses all hope at the age of twenty? And so she waited—starting and blushing at every sound—anxious, troubled, nervous, and depressed.

Laurence was lost in a chaos of conflicting schemes that had for their object the restoration of her erring husband to his home. She was very tired from time to time, but her cogitations became merged in dreams, and she heard her husband at the door—heard his voice cry—“Free, free again, dearest!” and then she would wake and find the reality confronting her harder than ever.

Montussan was clinging fiercely to the hope that Gaston would not come; and in a distant and sadly cloudy future he saw something like the sweet face of the girl before him, and he heard a resigned voice—he asked no more—say: “Well, I will be your wife if it will make you so very happy.” The vision haunted him. Every minute that passed without a ring at the outer door seemed an hour added to his life. When

he heard six o'clock strike, he felt almost as if he could look the rosy future in the face. With his wild, expansive nature, he would have sung, have leapt and ran, had he been alone, or with Riaux. Exquisitely tender things to be said to her came to his mind, and almost to his lips. He invented words to charm and seduce her, caresses which no woman could resist, a respect which no woman ever inspired. He loved with all the exaggeration inseparable from his temperament. Geneviève could have sent him to death with a gesture of her little finger.

Gaston came not; and the evening shadows were growing darker. The silence was oppressive. Every moment Geneviève cast a timid glance at the clock, wondering how, a little while ago, she could have thought the hours had leaden wings. How they flew now! Half-past six, then seven o'clock. Laurence began to tremble for her daughter.

"Oh!" she thought, "could he not soften his refusal in some way? Is he going to abandon her without even the form of an excuse, the semblance of a regret?"

Geneviève rose resolutely.

"Come," she said, "it is folly to wait any longer; Gaston will come no more!"

"Why do you say that?" Montussan inquired softly.

"It is self-evident, beyond doubt."

"Hush! hush! child; your cousin is too young to be utterly heartless."

"I tell you that he will not come; I feel it; I know it."

"It may be only an accidental delay," Montussan ventured. "M. Dormeau promised to come at five o'clock, I think you said. There are many unavoidable circumstances, little accidents that may have detained him."

"Ah! if he loved me—if he loved me as I love him," the young girl said with ingenuous openness, "he would not make me suffer like this!"

"I daresay that he'll come when you least expect him," the Bohemian replied.

"No, no. Everything has been against us, always against us. He will not link his fate with ours; there are too many shames and miseries to share."

Montussan reddened; in a halting, timid, hesitating fashion, he said—

"I would take all your shame, your misery on my shoulders, Mademoiselle, and be happier than I can say."

His tone was so tremulously earnest, the words had a sound of such absolute devotion in them, that Geneviève looked up rapidly, with an utterly changed expression. But noticing his haggard eyes, the thin hair already grey on the temples, the lined and furrowed face, she looked reassured, looked as if what she had fancied and feared for an instant could not be possible. Montussan's cold and reserved air had scarcely left him for a second.

"Why, what more could you do for us?" the young girl said.

"Who knows?" he answered, with deep significance.

Thus begun, the conversation must have become

dangerous for one at least of the speakers; but to Lucien's relief the bell rang, and Geneviève flew to the door.

A messenger presented a letter for Madam Largeval, who opened the missive with feverish impatience.

"It is from Gaston," she said.

"I knew it; he had not the courage to come and confess his contempt and horror in our presence."

"Wait, wait, Mademoiselle," said the Bohemian: "perhaps he explains his delay. You need not think that his desertion is certain, when . . ."

"It is certain!" murmured Laurence, with a gesture of dolorous certitude.

"Gaston Dormeau withdraws his promise?" said Lucien contemptuously.

"No, not formally. There are certain rules of politeness to be observed, you know. He is ingenious enough to gain his end without appearing base or even indifferent. Have you never received a strictly courteous, an irreproachable letter that said just the opposite of what it professed to say?"

Montussan was silent.

"My nephew has achieved a masterpiece in that line, and . . ."

"Take care, Madam, you are dealing hardly with your daughter."

"My own poor child!" cried the mother, taking Geneviève in her arms. "How you must suffer!"

"If I could die now, mother!" she gasped.

"If both of us could die, darling!" the mother added.

Geneviève's voice and expression of utter despair taught terrible truths to the Bohemian. He saw that all her love was Gaston's, and would be always his. His castles in the air crumbled to pieces abruptly, and became wretched ruins. He bore the destruction bravely.

"Well, my business is not yet done," he said to himself; "that is all. I must bring back that ungrateful young idiot—and I will, or it shall go hard with him." Then he turned to the two women who remained plunged in their desolation. "You speak of dying; have you the right to die?"

"Oh, I know what you are about to say," Laurence answered sharply.

"No common-place sermon, I assure you. Have you the right to die—yet?"

"How do you mean—yet?"

"Your innocent husband has need of your help, your encouragement. To abandon him now would be treachery, cowardice. I want to assist you as far as my power goes. Let us work together; let our advocate obtain the post-mortem analysis; and when we have tried everything that man can do—and failed—then talk of dying if you like."

Even in their sorrow both were sensible women, and they gave in to Montussan's arguments immediately, acknowledging without affectation or exaggeration that their lives belonged to the father and the husband in his peril.

"I dare not bid you hope yet," said Lucien, as he

rose to go ; "but this misguided young man has perhaps only succumbed to a momentary weakness . . ."

"We ask him nothing," said Genèvieve coldly, while the belying tears welled in her eyes.

"We have now only one friend left," said Laurence,—"you. And you have already done so much for us that if you too fall away . . ."

"Come, Madam," the Bohemian interrupted sharply, "you are not going to call me names, I hope. What right have you to consider me utterly vile?"

"You are right, M. Montùssan. Pardon me."

"Pardon you ! could you anger me ? Let me counsel you to keep up your courage ; and let me see you every day."

"We shall look for you."

Montussan left his friends in a condition of profound discouragement. The careless hanger-on to the skirts of society had disappeared. Geneviève had made of him in a few weeks a serious man with altered habits and tastes. He began by soberly regarding the situation from every side. No matter what happened, Geneviève, with all her beauty and purity, would be a convict's daughter. There was a shamefaced, an unavowed joy in the thought—that fascinated him. Her misfortune was his chance. Gaston, it was evident, would not take a wife from the family of his father's assassin, and despite all that Lucien had said, it was hardly fair to blame his resolution. The field was free then, and it depended upon him to win her love.

He dared not pursue the dream too far, fearing to meet some insurmountable obstacle.

"To win her love!" he repeated mechanically; and all down the broad Boulevard the words rang like music in his head: "If I could win her love!"

Crossing the Seine, he came upon Gaston Dormeau, whose head was bent, and whose gait denoted profound dejection. He was a handsome youth, dark of skin, with a fine and soft beard, and a supple and alert figure. There was quick intelligence in his eye, not the intelligence of a poet or prophet, but the sound, serviceable intelligence of a clever young man of the world. He was evidently returning from the Boulevard Saint Michel. Lover-like, he had probably been haunting the vicinity of Madam Largeval's house, deciding at last to let a letter convey his farewell. Montussan was able to contemplate his rival at his leisure, for Gaston trudged his way, noticing nobody. The study was not productive of hope. Montussan laughed bitterly at himself.

"Montussan, my good fellow," was his internal remonstrance, "you must be losing your head. Just compare yourself for a moment with yonder bright young fellow, full of hope and promise. Is it likely a girl will give up loving him, even though loving be hopeless? And give him up to come to you! The thing is manifestly impossible."

But yet in a corner of his brain a vague voice kept singing: "And yet if I could but win her love!"

"I ought to carry a looking-glass about with me," he said, scolding himself. "That would be enough to bring

me to my senses when the fancy takes me to go wool-gathering in this fashion. I have a nice battered old figurehead to go courting with! Look at him. He might be in his grave, and her love would follow him there. Was it not evident just now that she may die of her love and his abandonment, but will never forget him?"

Very bitter was then the reflection that if he had worked, if he had treated life seriously and earnestly, he might, as Riaux said, be now in possession of fame and fortune, a strong and prosperous man of middle age, whose homage no woman would disdain. And he was hopeless and helpless, with no future and with no past.

"And I have the impudence to complain, too!" he added, with a mocking laugh. "Her love, her love—yes, I may win it. I may make her happiness so complete, so lasting before I die, that she will be compelled to give me some affection in return; and then when she comes to know how I have loved her, who knows? perhaps she'll feel a little tenderness for the memory of the old fogey I must seem to her. So, to work, my man. We must first bring back this stray sheep to the fold. He is mooning ahead there, thinking that his heart is broken and the end of the world is close at hand. How delighted he'll be to hear a friendly voice tell him that he is altogether wrong, order him to do what he is dying to do—go back to her this very evening! That is the one way to win her love; and—and as for my wretched middle-aged passion—I'll throw it in the Seine, with a big flagstone round its neck!"

XXIII.

THE Bohemian walked deliberately up to Gaston Dormeau, who was slowly disappearing under the budding plane-trees of the broad quay. Touching the young man smartly on the shoulder, he said—

“A word with you, M. Dormeau, if you please.”

Recognising the speaker Gaston raised his head, and his puckered forehead cleared. Montussan was convinced that his prophecy must come true; the lover only wanted a decent excuse, a little persuasion to return to his love. But on a sudden the young man's face fell again.

“You want to speak to me?”

“Well, it looks like it, since I have ventured to interrupt meditations of more than ordinary joviality.”

“Pray, spare me your gaiety, M. Montussan.”

“I am not going to spare you anything.”

“You are adopting a rather singular tone, sir,” the young man remarked with some anger.

Montussan felt that stray sheep were not so easily dealt with as he had imagined. He was acting under two conflicting impulses. He was anxious to know whether Gaston had positively decided to break with his betrothed of yesterday—a decision that would have filled

him with a shamefaced delight ; and at the same time he longed to actively resent Dormeau's presumptuous abandonment of a bride, in every way immeasurably too good for him. All that he had just heard from Madam Largeval increased his perplexity and intensified his excitement. So his tone had not softened when he resumed—

"Do you know one thing, M. Dormeau?"

"Several," returned Gaston sharply.

"You are simply committing a mean action!"

"In what way?" the young man asked, controlling himself with some difficulty.

"In deserting Madam Largeval and her daughter."

"I might remind you, sir, that this is my private business. But I remember that you have rendered generous service to my relatives and to me, and I do not mind proving to you that what I have done, everybody would expect me to do, nobody will blame me for doing."

"Here is somebody who does blame you."

"I will show you in a moment that you are unjust."

"I will listen ; but you will find it difficult to convince me."

"My father died mysteriously, under circumstances which certainly appeared discreditable. I have been reproached with this—as if any responsibility could rest on me—by my aunt and uncle. And now I learn that my father's murderer was—a Largeval ! What was I to do?"

Montussan had no answer ready.

"I loved my cousin with all my heart ; I am not knave or idiot enough to charge her with her uncle's or father's crimes. But I ask you, can I marry her? Can I give my father's name to the blood-relation of his assassin? Who would advise me to insult my father's memory in that fashion?"

"And so then, . . ." Montussan was beginning.

"A moment, please. It is cruel to give her up, but it is necessary. I am poor; I depend upon my labour, and that depends upon the preservation of my fair fame. There are social laws, social prejudices, if you like, against which I cannot struggle. My union with Geneviève would mean separation from the rest of the world for her and for me—in other words, poverty."

"You have resolved upon giving her up?"

"I do not say that; but for a time I must cease to go there. The trial may bring out some facts favourable to my uncle. But if my father met his death at the hand of a Largeval, I declare that, though I should break my heart, I will not marry Geneviève."

"And you pretend to love her!" exclaimed Montussan so excitedly, that wayfarers turned round to stare at him.

"Sir! we need not explain to all Paris . . ."

"That's true. I was wrong to lose my temper. But upon my word, you are a splendid specimen of the modern lover!"

Now that he had ascertained beyond question that Dormeau's resolution was taken, Montussan saw only Geneviève's misery and forgot his own chances. Irritated

beyond endurance by the thought that anyone should argue in cold reason on a subject that concerned Geneviève's happiness, he took the young man to task with a high hand.

"You mean to say that you loved Mademoiselle Geneviève!"

"I swear that I love her still."

"Nonsense. You must not try to make a fool of me, M. Dormeau; I am not in the humour to endure it."

"Do you want to quarrel with me in order to compel me to dishonour myself?"

"I am not going to quarrel. I am going to tell you that her father and her uncle may have been everything that is bad, but she is a pure and perfect maiden, whom no disgrace can touch."

Montussan spoke with undisguised fervour, with exaggerated gestures. Gaston gazed at him, at first with prodigious surprise, and then with a shrewd inkling of the truth.

"What is her fault, if you please? Yesterday you wanted to embrace me out of gratitude."

"I am still grateful, sir."

"And now a bit of bad news—very bad news, I confess—kills all your love at a blow."

"Bids me silence it."

"Why, your love is a broken reed at best. If you had ever loved your cousin you would have had the manliness at least to spare her the anguish she went through to-day."

"What! you have seen her?"

"I have just left her, utterly cast down by your cowardly abandonment. Ah, young man, you talk of love,—if I had cared for a woman who was like her in any way, there is nothing in this world that would have made me give her up. If she had once put her hand in mine, I would have taken good care that no breath of scorn or contumely ever reached her. Hearing what you heard this afternoon, I should have gone straightway to her and asked her as a boon to leave France with me for some land, where, as Madam Montussan . . ."

He stopped, his face covered with blushes.

"I . . . I mean Madam Dormeau, of course; you're the person interested. Well, as I was saying, the harder fate, providence, what you will, proved itself; the stronger I should be to protect her, unjustly tried as she is. But you can never have known how to love. You have got a couple of valves there, of course; but even the most cold-blooded anatomist would not flatter them by calling them a heart. It has been the greatest of all Geneviève's misfortunes that she met you—aye, and nearly died for you one day, though, I daresay, you have forgotten the trifling service."

Gaston's eyes had been steadily fixed on the Bohemian's face. He dropped them now, and answered not. He began to understand. Montussan's fervour and fierceness would have bred some suspicion in the mind of an indifferent stranger. In the mind of a man as nearly interested in Geneviève as Gaston Dormeau was they bred conviction. The young man had not ceased to adore

his cousin. The idea that Montussan loved her too, and that he was now free to win her,—no doubt would win her in her loneliness and lassitude, the thought that he was yielding up his love to a rival—that was a jealous agony which the young man felt he could not long endure. His love was yet passionate and tenacious; custom had not staled it; the worldly arguments he still believed in could not kill it.

"Do you remember Corneille's tragedy, 'The Cid'?" asked Montussan abruptly.

"Rodrigue had not murdered the Count."

"Good-bye," growled Lucien, turning his back.

"Where are you going?"

"What can that matter to you? Our acquaintance stops here."

Gaston strode rapidly after the retreating form, and planted himself in his path.

"Listen to me. I am suffering torture."

"You show a fine Spartan self-restraint then."

"Your words have moved me in many ways."

"And you are not going to your cousin's?"

"No."

"Then go to the devil, where I am going too, I think!" cried the furious Bohemian.

"Listen; you love Geneviève."

"I! I!" exclaimed Montussan, thunderstruck.

"Yes, you. Is there anything astounding in that?"

Montussan had recovered his presence of mind, and the explosion of laughter he indulged in was intended to arrest all suspicion on Gaston's part. Only it was too

loud ; and the young man remained henceforth convinced that Montussan was, actively or not, his rival.

Straightway his dead father, the world and its opinion, his own reasonable arguments were forgotten. With the natural egotism of a young man's love, he could have left Geneviève alone, he could not leave her to another. The other was there before his eyes, ready to pass over all the obstacles he, Gaston, had made so much of. Leaving Montussan with a silent bow, Dormeau, in ten minutes, was at Madam Largeval's door.

"Gaston ! Gaston !" cried Geneviève. "Oh, we were all mistaken !" and she ran to him with eager hands and a face full of sunny smiles.

Laurence looked anxiously at him, fearing that he might have come in order formally to bid farewell.

"Listen to me, dear, and then pardon me if you can."

"Pardon you," the girl echoed, trembling again.

"Yes, darling : I was base, calculating, cold for a moment, and now I am penitent. Your first word just now proves to me that I was wrong and cruel."

"But now you are here ; you love me still, you do not despise us."

"I must own the worst, dear ! When I left the Palace of Justice, having heard everything that you must know by this time, I was mad. I was miserable enough to give you back your promise."

"Then your letter was a good-bye, and everything was over between us !"

"It was my first wretched impulse."

"O Gaston, I should have died !"

"Poor Geneviève!" he said, holding her hands: "Think of all that I had just learnt, of all that I was suffering, and be merciful."

"Merciful! Ah! I am only thankful now you are here again."

"I was half distracted. I was full of foolish ideas about honour, worldly considerations; I wrote precipitately, almost without thinking. Had I reflected a moment you would have been spared all pain, and I this regret. Pardon me, my Geneviève."

"I not only forgive, I bless you, dear, for coming back to this desolate hearth. You were in the right after all; knowing all that we know, it was your right to forget us."

"Geneviève!"

"I speak as I think, dear. Your love has been stronger than your reason—and I am thankful that it is so. But our marriage must not be one of mere impulse, Gaston."

"Now you are punishing me, Geneviève."

"No, I am doing my duty, dear. You know the hard alternative before us. You would sacrifice everything to me, and I love you better than ever for it. But you must reflect!"

"Oh, I have reflected too much already. Your words are cruel."

"No; but a girl's intelligence grows rapidly in a crisis like ours, and I am only reasonable."

"Come, let us speak of the future. Firstly, we'll leave France."

"Let us speak of the present first ; it is terribly dark, Gaston. Let us look at it as it is, so that there may be no disappointment in the future."

Geneviève spoke deliberately and clearly. Gaston listened with growing respect, marvelling that this could be the thoughtless, girlish cousin, his first love. She went on with simple explicitness—

"In a month, dear, remember, unless some unforeseen, un hoped-for good fortune comes to us, my father will be found guilty. If there is justice on earth he will not be punished hardly for an error that came of the best, the kindest sentiments ; but—but he must suffer. I shall make a poor wife for any man then, Gaston ; the daughter of . . . you know what."

With a supplicatory gesture Gaston bade her be silent ; but she would explain her meaning to the fullest.

"Nevertheless, I will be your wife, if you wish it. But if there is the shadow of a hesitation in your mind, if you feel it possible that you should ever think of me slightly—oh, Gaston, go ; I give you back your freedom."

"Geneviève ! you know my esteem is as great as my love."

"I believe you ; but still you must take time to think. I should never be good or patient enough to take your neglect meekly. I will not take you by surprise. You must decide deliberately. I can tell you without coquetry, for we are in too serious a position for that, that I ask no better fate on earth than to be your wife. But there is another fate I could not bear : to be your wife

and know that you had ceased to love me because I am the daughter of George Largeval."

Laurence had left the room, unable to restrain her emotion. Gaston knelt at Geneviève's side, protesting in all sincerity that his hasty rejection of her filled him with deep remorse, as he was able better to appreciate the treasure vouchsafed him. Smiling, blushing, and overjoyed, his cousin yet repeated sagely—

"Still you must promise to reflect."

"I have reflected; I, too, love you unselfishly, thinking only of your happiness . . ."

"You, too!" exclaimed Geneviève wonderingly.

Gaston bit his lips; he had almost betrayed Montus-san's secret.

"No matter what happens," he went on hurriedly; "no matter how they judge your father's venial fault, I am your husband, dearest. From this day we are one, if you have no hidden thought in bidding me wait."

"A hidden thought! I do not think that I ever had one, Gaston, unless it was too happy a thought of you."

Gaston took her to his arms; girl and boy lost themselves in dreams of the future that was to be glad, let fate do its worst; the evil world was to be shut out from them; and solemnly, on the very memory of his murdered father, the young man pledged his troth to a daughter of the slayer's house.

He spoke with firm and deep conviction, his voice thrilling with an emotion which no man could have feigned. Madam Largeval re-entered the room and heard his concluding protestations with a sentiment of profound

relief. Forgetting nothing of her own affliction, she was yet warmed in a fashion with a reflection of her daughter's bliss and security. But when heaven and earth have ceased to be, and love is everything, time is necessarily annihilated ; and it was late when the mother, in a few sober words, reminded them that the bad times were not over yet, and that there was a father and a husband to save, not only a young man and maiden to marry.

"Oh, perhaps we shall have him back among us much sooner than you think," said Gaston with vague hopefulness.

"Perhaps. But a good result will depend much on you and on me. We must guard ourselves, and not commit one indiscretion that might make his position worse."

A long kiss, that was one of joy and hope in spite of everything, and Gaston left them, in an ecstasy of love.

XXIV.

WHEN the young lover turned his back upon him, Montussan remained firmly persuaded that Gaston, grown tired of his homilies, had simply shirked the company of an intolerably prosy preacher. Secretly delighted that the young man had rejected his advice, he nevertheless walked to Riaux's in anything but a serene frame of mind. Riaux had become accustomed to see him thus. When first the poor Bohemian had felt himself in love, foolishly in love like an operatic tenor, the novelty of the situation had intoxicated him, and he had translated his sense of the incongruity in wild and incessant laughter. But he would have been hardly human if the certainty that Geneviève could never love him, that he must never speak of love to her, had not finally depressed him beyond measure. He became moody and silent. Nothing amused him, and he had not tasted punch for a fortnight—a phenomenon hitherto unparalleled in his existence.

And, on the other hand, he had given himself up to hard work. Whenever he was not at Madam Largeval's, the former idler was painting and modelling with feverish industry—aye, and selling his works at prices that surprised him. His facility was prodigious, and in a few

weeks he had earned a considerable sum of money—for what purpose nobody could divine. Riaux pretended that he was turning miser. There was perhaps some truth in the theory. Knowing that Largeval's money—for the moment at least—could not be utilised by his wife or daughter, he might have taken up brush and chisel as their self-constituted bread-winner.

To-day he entered his friend's studio muttering incoherent objurgations. He shook hands with Riaux, and strode up to his own easel.

"Montussan, dear boy," said the painter after a pause, "things are going badly with you."

"With me—eh?"

"If you could only see yourself! You look appalling."

"I cannot help it. The world is a mistake. Men are hounds. Nature is a monstrosity, and I have had enough of it."

"The world is a mistake, old fellow, because you will not do anything like anybody else; because you must wear yourself out in getting up a match between a young jackanapes and the one woman who would help your genius do big things."

"Genius! I say, Riaux, if you want to insult me . . ."

"And why are men hounds?"

"Because that confounded stripling whom I felt inclined to smack . . ."

"What stripling?"

"The interesting omnibus victim, Gaston Dormeau."

"What has the rival whom you patronise done?"

"He nearly fell into my arms yesterday when I took him to his aunt's and presented him to his bride . . ."

"So I should say?" put in Riaux.

"And now the puppy withdraws his promise, declines his cousin's hand, under the pretext that her father is accused of certain crimes—which he never committed, by the way."

"Montussan, you are raving!"

"I am not. You have not heard the news. The criminal is not Remi Largeval, but George. He has been recognised. Do not ask for any more explanations now. Poor Madam Largeval is in a deplorable condition. And you think the world is not a mistake?"

"I think that if Dormeau has backed out, you can come in."

"I thought of it," Montussan replied simply.

"At last! I am glad of it."

"Yes; but there is an obstacle, a formidable obstacle. She does not love me, she could never love me. She asked me to kiss her like her father! I am a fossil in her eyes."

He added in a few seconds—

"And that is what I ought to be. It is insane to have thought of being anything else. I was in my proper position, paternally bringing the young people together; and that is the position I must assume again. Her happiness—there can be no other aim in life for me. Ah! if she had ever thought of me—she should have been happy, I swear. But she could not think such ridiculous nonsense. And so, since she must have that young

commercial conqueror, Dormeau, Dormeau she shall have, if I have to thrash him into it."

"There you are again, Don Quixote. And I know you are suffering abominably."

"There I am—and—and life does not feel altogether a bed of roses. You are right. What does it matter? I tried to arrange a nice comfortable life, whence work, and pain, and duty, and responsibility should be excluded. Well, it did not do. They cannot be excluded. So much the worse for me."

He rose brusquely from his stool.

"Ah! the first woman that drew me out of the straight road where honest men toil . . . she may flatter herself that one man curses her with hearty gusto."

"How long is it since you remembered her name?" said Riaux smiling, and endeavouring to bring the Bohemian into a lighter humour.

"How long since I remembered her name? Ha! my friend, you're just a little mistaken there. Remember! I remember her name, her face, her lies—they especially. She was called Céleste, a fairly appropriate name. If I had her here now, Heaven knows what I might not be tempted to do. But she is dead, died in the flower of her forty years, and the devil . . ."

"Come, come, Montussan!"

"Let me tell my tale. When I think that I might have married a good, honest-faced girl, and made her happy, rich, honoured—well, I feel half frenzied. I might have had children at my knee—think of it!—have taught them myself—Ah! you do not understand the blessed

happiness of having somewhere a home where your joys, your griefs are reflected. But I am talking nonsense. I meant to say that I could have had it all, perhaps—but one day I must light upon an abominable woman, who took me, made me her prey, gulled me, perverted me, and left me a morally ruined castaway, to become a studio parasite, a borrower, an idler, a drunkard. I curse her first kiss, I hate her first smile; it is lucky for both of us that she never again fell into my hands. And they grin when I chatter. They think me droll, with my devil-may-care Diogenes manner!" How can they know all that I have suffered, feeling myself good for nothing all my life? Riaux, send for some punch; the witching hour has come!"

"Let the fit pass, old fellow. Do not kick against destiny."

"It is very well for you to talk. You are still young, fresh; you'll marry, and live happily ever after."

"Listen," said Riaux very seriously: "this morning I sold my big exhibition picture."

"Ah, that is good! Did you get a decent price for it?"

"Thirty-two thousand francs."

"Not bad, by Jove! You have got a little luck at least; there is consolation in that."

"Well, we'll take half of the thirty-two thousand francs and start together for a run through Europe. We'll make for St. Petersburg, get to the Black Sea, fall upon Constantinople; then we'll look up all the islands of the Archipelago, hunt up models and subjects . . ."

"It sounds a promising tour."

"You'll meet your old friends the Greek wines. So pack up, and we'll start next week."

Montussan remained a minute in mute consultation with himself. Then he raised his head.

"No. Your offer is terribly tempting ; but I dare not accept. Oh, do not protest ; it is not a question of false delicacy. I would take that, as I have taken other things from you ; besides, I have got a little money of my own laid by."

"Then, what keeps you back ? Come. You'll return cured. You will have forgotten Geneviève ; and of this fever there will only remain your good resolutions, your change of life and habits."

"What keeps me ? Forget Geneviève ! You are talking nonsense, my dear fellow."

"If you set your mind to it."

"Ah, but the mischief is that I will not set my mind to it. Go alone, old friend. Make your tour alone ; your talent will be twice as robust and original when you come back. Then, maybe, I shall be calm and cool again. Only let me work in your studio ; and do not be afraid that I'll disgrace it with work unworthy of it. But do not talk of forgetting. I am fixed to my rock—a sorry Prometheus ; and neither she nor you shall deliver me."

"That is your final resolve ?"

"It must be so. But I am as cheerful as a periwinkle. You see that punch is imperatively required."

Turning to Riaux's servant, who had just entered the room, he instructed him to bring two bowls of punch from a neighbouring café.

"Now, my dear Riaux, do not stay there plunged in

the depths of despair because I will not go sunwards with you. My sun is here. It is not a vivifying one, I am afraid—rather the contrary ; but I prefer it.”

“ No desperate follies, Montussan ; you promise ? ”

“ I promise. At any rate, I'll wait for your return.”

“ Now to dinner, Lucien ; it is nearly nine o'clock.”

“ I shall stay here.”

“ You are determined to drink ? ”

“ Like a fish or a Russian. You'll find me on the sofa.”

After Riaux had gone, Montussan lit the fourteen candles of the chandelier, placed Geneviève's portrait on a prominent easel, and began to drink big bumpers of punch, talking the while as no lover in his frenzy ever talked before. One after another the candles went out ; he noticed not the increasing darkness. At three o'clock he was stretched on the sofa, stupefied by alcohol.

This relapse into his old vices was a source of deep grief and humiliation to him. He had fallen in a sudden fit of despair. During a week he would not see Geneviève, apprehensive lest a trace of his weakness should be visible, and working more as a penance than as a pleasure. Every evening he completed a picture. He was seen nowhere. Men of his acquaintance accosted each other with—

“ You have not heard ? Montussan is in love ! ”

“ Aha ! with whom ? ”

“ Nobody knows.”

“ She must be a treasure in the way of morals and manners.”

And the sorry laugh went round.

XXV.

RIAUX hastened the preparations for his journey, and in the interval of working at his sketches Montussan assisted him. When everything was ready, the painter's departure was fixed for the end of May. Seeing his trunks strapped, a natural restlessness seized the artist.

"I do not see why I should not start even a few days earlier," he observed to Lucien.

"Why should you?"

"For one thing, I am afraid that before the end of the month I shall be summoned as a witness in that Largeval complication."

"In which I stupidly mixed you up. I daresay you will."

"If I am here I shall have to attend."

"And if you are not here they'll bring you back. You see all the newspapers have announced that you are bound for St. Petersburg. A letter to the ambassador or the consul-general will soon compel your return to Paris."

"What an infernal nuisance!" exclaimed Riaux, really vexed.

"Why do you not try to get it over beforehand?" suggested the Bohemian: "Go and see M. Mestras,

who has charge of the affair. Tell him that you have important commissions to execute out of France, and suggest that he can take down your deposition, if your evidence is of any use to him."

"A capital idea! Have you remarked that you are full of sound advice since . . ."

"Since I am not so full of punch," added Lucien sadly. "You could tell him that I remain here, and I know more about our nocturnal ramble than you. Then, perhaps, he will not call either of us, which would simplify matters even more."

"Why that hypothesis?"

"For this reason: if it is proved that Largeval is really Geneviève's father, and that, consequently, it is not he whom we saw on the night when we ran those rascals to earth, our story would have no immediate interest, as it deals only with Reni."

"Perhaps it may be so; but, at any rate, I'll put myself in order by calling on the magistrate."

Riaux found M. Mestras courteous and compliant. He opined that, having Montussan at hand, he might dispense with the painter's attendance. He therefore examined him briefly, had his depositions attested, and dismissed him, saying—

"If Largeval is sent to the assizes, and your testimony is considered to be of importance, this will be read in court. Good-bye, sir, and bring us back some masterpieces."

"One can but try," Riaux answered laughing; and they parted courteously.

The artist went home jubilant, rid of a disagreeable duty and ordeal ; and two or three days afterwards he was on his way to Russia.

Montussan, during the interval, had resumed his visits to Madam Largeval. In spite of M. Mestras' assurances, and the efforts of Lucien's friend, the advocate Glossard, the inquiry proceeded slowly ; no exhumation had yet been ordered. Montussan endeavoured to draw hopeful auguries from the absence of news, but in his heart he hoped little. Laurence had failed in her efforts to see M. Mestras once more. The incidents of her examination had probably necessitated a brief suspension of the inquiry. Thus the conversation during Montussan's visits ran entirely on conjectures.

Gaston came every night, and Geneviève was happy, despite her anxiety and the trouble around her. Lucien, on his side, suffered more bitterly every day. He went there to see her, to feel her in the room, to hear her voice, to be blest by her presence ; and now even this meagre boon was failing him.

"She thinks me a fossil," he had said to Riaux, bitterly laughing. It seemed as if he had spoken terrible truth. In the egotism of their young passion Gaston and Geneviève strove as much as possible to isolate themselves from Madam Largeval, and the middle-aged Bohemian, who was left to converse with her. At first they withdrew to the farther side of a table ; ere long they whispered in the shadow at the other end of the room ; and then, at last, they went into a little chamber adjoining, where, with the door ajar for meagre polite-

ness' sake, they babbled the beautiful nothings that are everything when they that love and speak them are only twenty years old.

This withdrawal wounded the poor Bohemian poignantly. It was a proof that Geneviève had never thought of him as a man who could love, as a man who could yearn for kisses and soft words. Even Laurence had grown to regard him as a kind of benevolent, distant uncle ; and he was treated familiarly, like one of the household. Sometimes Madam Largeval, busied with her home duties, would leave him alone for several minutes, apologising with the easy brevity of intimacy. At first Montussan used to retire, feeling that he might be importunate. But at last he became accustomed to his position in the house, and waited patiently, knowing that if he departed with Gaston Dormeau he must see Geneviève again, at least for a moment. The glimpse was a consolation that lasted until the morrow evening.

One night the lovers had withdrawn as usual to the little chamber Lucien had bitterly named the 'Bower.' He had exhausted the nightly provision of arguments with which he strove to feed the poor mother's fainting courage ; and she had excused herself for a few minutes.

Sorrowfully leaning back in his shabby chair, his feet extended, he remained gazing vaguely into vacancy, peopling it, doubtless, with the dear image he could not look upon in the flesh. The lovers had been speaking in audible tones while Madam Largeval and her guest

were conversing. Not noticing the cessation of the colloquy, they continued to speak in the same tone. At first Montussan heard them without listening. His name was mentioned, and his attention quickened. He bent forward, eager to catch what one of the speakers, at least, might say concerning him. But all that reached him were a few words of a lover's idle, lingering talk. Montussan could not resist the impulse that bade him draw near and ascertain what Geneviève's secret thoughts of him were. Feeling the while that there was dishonouring meanness in the action, he craftily wheeled his chair by slow stages across the carpet, and stationed himself against the half-open door, on the other side of which the lovers were exchanging their interminable confidences. He installed himself in such wise that his back was towards the door, and that nobody entering the room would suspect him of eaves-dropping.

This is what he heard :

"Have you never guessed it, noticed it?" asked Gaston.

"Noticed what, dear? That . . . that M. Montussan cared for me in the way you say?"

"In the way I know he does."

"You're laughing at me."

"No. I assure you that I have observed him closely, and I am certain that he loved you, if he does not love you still."

Gaston was careful not to avow that his jealousy of the man whom he was denouncing had been the chief cause of his own return to the path of duty.

Hearing his denunciation, Geneviève laughed—a little, involuntary laugh ; but it was a very knell in the listener's ears.

"What an absurd joke it would be!" chuckled the lucky suitor.

"Absurd!" the girl said gently. "But I do not believe you; I believe that you have invented the story to amuse me."

Every word was as a blow from a mace. Lucien bent his head instinctively, as though in fear of an avalanche.

"But do you not remember, Geneviève, that the day he brought me here—he spoke in an extraordinary fashion? I know that you must have remarked it."

"Yes; I did remark it. And I thought then that there was some secret sorrow, some secret love in his life. But I never dreamt that I had anything to do with the secret, or with love."

Then, after a brief silence, she added—

"Besides, what would have brought him here, had he been . . . been as foolish as you say he is? It is altogether impossible. Poor M. Montussan! Why, he is forty-five or fifty; he is anything but handsome; he is nearly bald! If I thought as you think, I should be afraid of him."

There was almost a shudder in her voice as she declared her feeling. Lucien sat paralysed in his chair, with eyes staring before him, all his strength gone.

Well he knew that Geneviève did not love him, could not love him. But to hear her say that, and in those cruel, careless terms, was a martyrdom almost beyond

endurance. A sob rose in his throat ; he thought, he hoped for a moment that it might stifle him, and all be ended there and then.

"If it only could be so !" he sighed.

But no ; it was agony, but death followed not. Stiffly, and to all appearances cold and collected, he rose and moved his chair, so as to produce a premonitory noise.

He was deadly pale. With a sudden violent movement he seized his hat, which happened to be within reach, and stepped over the threshold of the ' Bower.'

"I beg your pardon, young people," he said kindly, emphasising the ' young people.' "I beg your pardon for interrupting you ; two is company, and three is none, I know ;" and he laughed pitifully ; "but I wanted to say good-night."

"Are you going already, dear M. Montussan ?" said Geneviève, coming towards him, her hand outstretched.

"I am," he returned with an icy brevity which the girl did not notice.

He tottered.

"What is it ? Are you ill ?" exclaimed she anxiously.

"Not at all, I thank you."

"We shall see you to-morrow, then ?"

"Perhaps. I cannot say," he blurted out.

And with the gait of an automaton he passed down into the street.

XXVI.

MONTUSSAN could not find it in his heart to return to the scene of his torture and his humiliation for two or three days. His spirit was broken.

Men may reason with themselves, tell to their own hearts all the bitter truths which he had never ceased repeating to his, the certainty that the truth is as bitter as you say is always a galling surprise. Not only had Geneviève no love for him—to that much he was resigned ; but she looked upon his love for her as a repulsive monstrosity. And with the serene barbarity of many women, who rarely comprehend a sentiment that does not flatter their vanity, who can seldom put themselves in the place of others, she had spoken of his passion in a tone that not only rejected but seemed to disfigure and degrade it.

Montussan shut himself up, and consumed punch in a frenzy of disappointment. During the day he succeeded in working, but his nights were given to the punch-bowl and to thoughts of Geneviève.

He reproached her for nothing even at the worst of his pain. It was no fault of hers that she had not seen his love ; aware of his folly, no doubt she would have dealt with it—if not more pitifully, at least more courteously.

Since Riaux's departure, Montussan was the sole occupant of his friend's studio. At first he only left it to pay his daily visit to Madam Largeval. But after hearing Geneviève's cruel appreciation of his misfortune, he would not cross the threshold. His passion had become more intense, condensed, as it were; and it being his nature to translate every feeling by outward manifestations, every day he completed two or three portraits of his idol. The first, the finest painting, he would not touch. He had framed it himself, and hung it in the studio, choosing a spot where the light was most direct, and gave the work its fullest charm and value. Opening the door to nobody, he was not afraid of his secret masterpiece being seen; and in utter solitude he wooed and worshipped the painted counterfeit.

"This portrait will not tell me that I am old and foul-featured," he would murmur; "it will not protest that it is madness to think of me and love together. It will have no disdainful pout when I tell it of my adoration and the happiness it would be to die at Geneviève's behest, for her behoof, at a sign from her."

His lamentations would perhaps have been less grievous had he seen Geneviève that night of his agony. After he left, and when her lover had gone, the young girl thought seriously of the secret which Gaston pretended to have discovered. Her elbow on the mantel-piece of her little room, she lost herself in dreams and recollections.

"If it were true!" she said to herself.

And it recurred to her that Lucien had spoken with

strange emotion on the day he had brought Gaston to his betrothed. There could be no doubt about the fact that the Bohemian had at heart some hopeless passion that was as a blight upon his life.

"If it should be for me!" she repeated, blushing in her solitude. "If the love which he hides with a kind of shrinking, a kind of shame, were love for me!"

She stopped abruptly, as though she had seen at her feet some unfathomable abyss.

"Oh, what a misery it would be!" she said in a moment, wringing her hands. "He is so good, so generous, so clever; and yet, why should he have been so good and generous to people whom he did not know? There must have been some reason. Poor, poor M. Montussan; I would have given so much to see him happy!"

She refused to complete her thought, and shook it from her with a movement of the head.

"I am ridiculous," she said. "Fancy going out of one's way to imagine a thing like that! It is not possible; M. Montussan has never thought of me in that way, and Gaston does not know what he is saying."

Thus concluding, Geneviève went tranquilly to bed, and rose in the morning with scarcely a trace of her nocturnal reverie. In two or three days she had almost forgotten the subject.

Other more serious and positive subjects were pressing. Her husband's advocate informed Madam Largeval that the autopsy of Remi Largeval's remains was about to take place; and, effectively, the exhumation was at last

accomplished. The Prefecture's medical adviser was assisted by a doctor designated by Laurence. Unhappily the law's delay had been fatal to all possibility of obtaining positive evidence. The decomposition was so complete that theoretical conjecture had to take the place of demonstration.

M. Mestras had recommended that the chief object of the inquiry should be to determine whether the dead man had been strangled or no. Their attention was, therefore, specially directed to that point. But the condition of the head, and neck, and breast allowed scope for a fine variety of opposite opinions. Doctors could disagree as they chose.

The medical luminary, whose business it was to please the Prefecture, did not fail to discover that there was a significant contraction of the muscles and nerves of the neck.

Madam Largeval's doctor demonstrated with equal clearness that this contraction was the simplest and most natural thing in the world; apoplexy explained it fully. If the adverse party wanted to prove strangulation, they must show traces of undue pressure, which pressure would inevitably determine in the parts to which it was applied a more rapid decomposition. And these traces were not to be found.

The first expert replied, the second retorted. There was a brisk battle that amused them all hugely, and only tortured three or four people. Then it was decided that a third authority was imperatively required.

This last-comer happened to be a man of skill and real

learning. He had the thorough manner of a Dupuytren or an Abernethy, but he was also as honest and sincere as either. Directly he had looked at the ghastly thing that had been Remi Largeval, he turned to his colleagues and sneered in their faces.

"And so you have both an idea that you are going to discover evidence in this condition of the body? Evidence pointing to the way in which the man came to his death! You are laughing at the Prefecture and at the prisoner. Only one thing can be verified now."

"What is that?" the doctor asked sourly.

"If the man was poisoned, you may discover traces of the poison. If he died in any other way, even a violent death, I defy you to establish the fact."

This opinion might have reconciled the two experts. It had a diametrically opposite effect. Each clung the more tenaciously to his own conviction. The medical representative of Madam Largeval decided in favour of the very plainest and commonest form of apoplexy. The doctor enlisted on the side of the law did not hesitate to affirm that Remi had been strangled. The third authority called his colleagues asses.

The natural result of the discussion, however, was that M. Mestras adopted instinctively the opinion of the expert for the prosecution.

Largeval ceased to be the accomplice of Rouillouzé, Perlot, and Tricart, to become the murderer of his own brother.

Henceforward the prosecution was to be conducted on this basis. Future revelations would show whether

the first hypothesis was admissible or not; the prosecution argued against, but did not absolutely exclude it.

M. Glossard, the advocate, immediately communicated the result of the inquiry to Madam Largeval. He announced that George would probably be tried at the coming assizes. In its new phases the problem presented few difficulties as compared with those that hedged round the case of Remi Largeval.

After listening attentively to her advocate, Madam Largeval exclaimed—

“My poor husband is lost, then!”

M. Glossard unfortunately belonged to the category of pessimist advisers. He systematically discouraged his clients, kept success, if he achieved it, as a glad surprise, and never thought of all the gnawing anxiety that went before.

“Lost, eh! No, Madam,” he replied tranquilly; “they have certainly not proofs enough to get him the maximum punishment.”

The poor wife trembled; his words were like an icy wind.

“But it is not unlikely that the end will be a certain number of years of imprisonment, or even penal servitude.”

“And yet he is innocent, sir.”

“Oh, of course,” the barrister responded, with a ready professional and transparently insincere confidence.

“How shall we prove it then? Oh, what ought to be done?” exclaimed Laurence, cast down by the lawyer’s tone.

"Have faith in me," he said paternally. "If your husband can be saved . . ."

"He must, if such a thing as justice exists."

"If he can be saved, he will be saved by me, you may implicitly rely upon that."

And presently, making a formal bow, and assuming the solemn and preoccupied air that distinguishes most French barristers when they are not before a judge, he left Madam Largeval in mortal anguish. Geneviève had heard everything; and she too was without voice and without courage.

During the last few days she had been living in the fools' paradise that flowers always under lovers' feet. Her love and her lover had been all the world to her. The abrupt fall from her ethereal height was horrible. Echoing mentally her mother's exclamation, she too, with a sense of utter impotence, asked—

"What ought to be done?"

And then she remembered Montussan, remembered that he had not paid his accustomed visit for some days back.

In her unconscious selfishness the young girl had accustomed herself to look upon Montussan as a species of providentially appointed guardian-angel, her natural ally or defender in any moment of peril or difficulty. That was his mission in life, he had always said. Now, at this moment, when their own advocate seemed to have lost all hope, she felt that there was only Montussan who could give them help or counsel; and with-

out thinking of Gaston's communication a few nights ago, she said impulsively to her mother—

“Mother, we must send to M. Montussan. He will know what to do!”

“How can he?” the poor woman answered querulously. “And, besides, he has deserted us; he has not been for some days.”

“Write to him.”

“No; we have no right to impose on his good nature. We cannot instal ourselves in his life, as if we were his sisters or cousins.”

“Still—still he is the only person whom I know can save papa, I am sure.”

And thinking this, Geneviève passed into her bedroom, took a sheet of note-paper, and wrote to Montussan simply and hurriedly: “Come, if you can—and soon.”

A few minutes afterwards she stole out hastily and posted her note, which she had not mentioned to her mother.

Montussan, who was still claustrated in his friend's studio, received the laconic missive at six o'clock. Without reflection, without for a moment dwelling on the words which he had overheard a few days before, he left his work, and started for the Rue Racine. Geneviève needed him; that was enough. He would not take a cab; it was only discreet to allow the ladies time for dinner.

Starting almost mechanically, he had leisure to think

deeply during the long walk to Madam Largeval's house. He was surprised that Geneviève should have written to him; but did not doubt for a moment that she had excellent reasons for this infraction of the strict rules framed for the guidance of young French girls. What the reason could be, he could not guess. 'Against his reason, his thoughts would return to the scene in the little chamber where the lovers sat and talked. Had Geneviève began to suspect anything, seeing that he came no more? Was it possible that she had sent for him to console him, or to ask his forgiveness for her slighting words?

This last conjecture was too terrible to be faced. It had almost compelled him to turn back, when a happier, if a wilder, idea came to him.

"She is a woman, after all," he said to himself. "Is it not possible that . . ."

And then he stopped, blushing, and angry with himself.

"Idiot! idiot!" he murmured. "Am I still clinging to an insane hope after all I heard the other night? Was there not a death wound in every one of her thoughtless words—words that ought to kill everything in me save my regret at having met her and fallen into this mad error. She wants me, to try some new torture on me; and upon my word, I deserve it. When a man has my age and my face, my manner—and my past, he ought to fly from innocent young girls like the plague; or else one ought to suffer without complaining. And that is

what I must do, for I shall never have courage enough to avoid her."

It was nearly half-past seven when he rang at the Largevals' door. Dormeau had not yet arrived.

Had Geneviève been the keen-eyed coquette which many girls are at her age, she would have remarked the promptitude with which Montussan had obeyed her with something like triumph. Not three hours had elapsed since the writing of her letter and Montussan's appearance at her door.

But she was too impatient, too agitated, to notice such circumstances. They might have enlightened her as to the Bohemian's feelings, had she observed them. All she knew was that Montussan was there; that everything was not lost since that champion had not deserted.

"Thank you—thank you for coming," she said, almost tenderly, in her cordial gratitude. "And so soon too! You must try and console two wretched, almost hopeless women."

"Have you had news—bad news, then?"

"Yes; and you are the only hope which we have left."

"I am? But what can I do?—Firstly, though, you must tell me everything."

"Of course, yes; you cannot guess."

And in a few words they told him all that the advocate had communicated; his small hope, his gloomy fear. And when the whole dismal story was known, Geneviève

rose and stood in front of him, and took his hands with a simple, confiding gesture.

"M. Montussan," she said, "I will recall to you the first kind and brave thing you did for me: you saved me from death. Later, when we had a double misery to bear, poverty and bereavement, you saved us from one evil at least, thanks to the most pious of frauds, I am sure. You will not think what I am about to say presumptuous. You have taught us to rely on you as on a providence . . ."

"Rather a bald and wrinkled providence, eh?" put in the Bohemian, with a smile of intense bitterness, which he scarcely strove to disguise.

The allusion was lost upon Geneviève, who had almost forgotten Gaston's recent revelations. She only said reproachfully—

"Oh! how can you find it in your heart to jest now?"

"I am wrong. Forgive me; and tell me what I can do."

"One thing . . . a difficult thing," she returned imploringly. "My poor father is lost—save him as you saved us."

Montussan, moved, said almost impatiently,

"Save him! save him, Mademoiselle! that is easily said. How? Have you discovered any means, any stratagem, any scheme?"

"Ah! no, unfortunately. I thought of you as one thinks of a guardian-angel. I said to myself: We have no help, no ally, no friend but him. He will devise

something. And then I wrote. You are so clever, so ingenious, so full of resources. I was sure that you would find some way of restoring my father to us—or at least of saving him from a shameful punishment which he has not deserved.”

“Mademoiselle, this time you have called me a guardian-angel, and I need not tell you that I feel flattered . . .”

“Sir—sir! you cannot have the heart to laugh . . .”

“Kindly let me finish. I was saying, the most devoted guardian-angel that ever man had would find it difficult to extricate M. Largeval from the extraordinary predicament in which he is placed. It is not an easy thing, therefore, for the cleverest of men—and I will not accept the word as applied to me—for a man whom you consider full of infinite ingenuity and resource.”

“M. Montussan,” Geneviève began, in a calmer and softer strain. Lucien could not look, could not listen, without emotion. “M. Montussan, I have said you are our only hope. Oh, show us some way out of this misery. You do not know how dear you would be to me.”

She slid rather than fell into a kneeling posture.

“If you abandon me I know not what will become of me. And then,” she added, in a whisper, “I am not—oh, I am not quite sure of Gaston. If he were to fail me again . . .”

Unwittingly she was lacerating the poor old artist’s heart. Every word was a blow; and he stood there, pale and flushed by turns; touched by her voice, by her contact; then moved to bitter hopelessness by her re-

ference to her lover ; he could not speak ; the changes in him were so great, so varied, so many, that he was overcome by them, and rendered mute.

Geneviève became more and more pressing, half mistaking the Bohemian's confusion for reluctance. Tears came to her help, while her mother looked on, guessing something of the truth, and doubtful whether Montussan's suffering did not almost equal her own.

At last Montussan stooped and raised the weeping girl.

"Let me conjure you in my turn, Mademoiselle, not to add to the pain which the consciousness of my own helplessness gives me. I cannot bear your tears and sobs."

She obeyed him, endeavoured to control herself, and at last stood quietly in front of him, her face fairer for its tears. And now and then she cast on the Bohemian an appealing glance that would have softened an inquirer.

Montussan contemplated her rapturously. In the midst of his anguish it was an intoxicating delight, almost a payment for all his pain, to see her implicit faith, her blind confidence in him.

He had quite lost the constrained attitude in which he had listened to her first appeals ; and now there was nothing which he would not have given in exchange for some plan whereby Largeval might be saved.

But no plan was forthcoming.

"Ah !" he exclaimed, with savage emphasis, "if it were only necessary to sacrifice a life that has never

been of any use to anybody, how soon one might solve the problem ! ”

“ Oh, if you say such things,” cried Geneviève, “ I’ll ask you to forget that I have ever asked you anything. I would not suggest such thoughts for worlds.”

She had scarcely uttered the last words when Montussan cried, as though illumined by a sudden light—

“ And why not after all . . . ”

“ Oh, you have discovered something ! ” exclaimed the girl, interrupting him breathlessly.

“ Only a slender chance, a vague hope. I do not want to raise your expectations, and disappoint you at last, so I will keep my scheme secret for the present.”

“ I have all confidence in you. And, oh, sir, if all my life could reward you . . . ”

“ What do you mean by that ? ” Montussan interrupted roughly. “ You should not say such things, Mademoiselle.”

The colour left her cheeks, and her heart beat furiously ; she had nearly understood.

The Bohemian hastened to add more lightly—

“ You know if you said that to a younger and vainer man than myself, Heaven knows what recompense he might begin to expect—a place in your life which only Gaston can claim.”

She looked down, her forehead flushing.

“ I have no ambition in that way,” Lucien went on gaily ; “ such aspirations do not belong to men of my build and my years. But, there, enough on that sub-

ject. I can tell you, Mademoiselle, that I think I have hit upon a plan for saving your father."

"Oh, you give us new life!" Geneviève exclaimed.

"Only, in order to execute my project with some chance of success, I must cease to see you for some time."

"We cannot assist you?" asked Laurence.

"You cannot."

"Well, you will do your best; and if the prayers of two poor women can avail aught, you will be well protected, sir."

"If I succeed," he began . . .

"Oh, if you succeed, sir, we shall be sorely puzzled to know what to say, what to do for you—to show gratitude for goodness immeasurable and untiring."

"Ah! Madam, I shall have something to ask you—a recompense, and both of you must promise to accord it."

His tone was grave, even severe, though perhaps he knew it not.

"Will you promise?" he asked.

"I will," Laurence answered.

"And you, Mademoiselle?"

Poor Geneviève hesitated. All that Gaston had told her rushed back to her mind, and she feared to give an unknown pledge. Presently she remembered, however, that her father's liberty was at stake, that if needs be she must sacrifice herself for him. And bravely, deliberately, albeit her voice trembled, she said—

"And I, too, promise, M. Montussan."

"Remember that you have given your word," Lucien said impressively ; "it may mean more than you think."

"I have reflected, sir, and I am ready to do anything that will help to save my father."

"Then good-bye, Mademoiselle, and I thank you. It is probable, possible at any rate, that we may not meet again."

"Never again !" cried Geneviève.

"Oh, never is a very big word," he returned smiling.

"But perhaps we shall not meet for a long time."

"Are you going to run any risk ?"

"Perhaps. And let me give you this last recommendation : whenever it is absolutely necessary that I should communicate with you, you will receive my letters from the hands of M. Glossard. Any other communication made in my name will be worthless."

"What is your plan ?" Laurence asked anxiously.

"That is my secret ; I cannot tell it to you," he said, his voice half-stifled. "Good-bye—good-bye."

He pressed Laurence's hand ; he held that of Geneviève a few seconds longer ; and then, with one long look, was gone.

XXVII.

LEFT alone, the two unhappy women viewed the prospect presented by Montussan's promise with somewhat different eyes. Madam Largeval felt almost remorseful at having accepted the "devotion of a comparative stranger.

Geneviève accepted the sacrifice with ingenuous readiness, saying simply—

"Now I feel that all will go well. M. Montussan is sure to succeed."

He had accustomed her to rely upon him without scruple and without debate.

On his side, he strode down the boulevard murmuring words of less happy import—

"Ah! poor child, you do not know what you have asked me. But, no matter, you shall have it. The die is cast, as they say in melodramas. Montussan, your destiny's decided. Forward, without fear, or care, or hope."

And as he spoke, a frank, almost a joyous smile curled his lip, and shone in his quick, intelligent eye. It was months since that smile had been there!

He turned into the Boulevard Saint Germain, made for the Rue Hautefeuille, and finally roused Prudent

Pascalín from his slumbers in the little room of the Rue Serpente.

"Good evening, concierge. Don't you know me?" he said, laughing.

Pascalín stretched himself, slowly abandoned his recumbent position, and stared sleepily at his visitor.

"Know you—of course I do. You're the clever one who guessed that the two robbers had got into M. Largeval's house."

"I am. And how's that affair going on?"

"Upon my word, sir, I can't understand it at all. You know the first time that they sent for me to the Palace of Justice, they asked me if I recognised M. Remi Largeval."

"Of course you did not hesitate?"

"Of course not. I who was used to seeing him every day for years, how could I be mistaken?"

"Ah! M. Pascalín, men, and even concierges, are all liable to error; it is human to err, M. Pascalín."

"I begin to believe it. Eight days after that they sent for me again, and they tell me—the man whom you recognised as Remi Largeval is George Largeval his brother."

"You don't mean it!"

"But I do."

"And you were brought face to face with the new Largeval?" Montussan inquired innocently.

"On the spot."

"And again recognised him without the slightest hesitation?"

"You're right. This brother is exactly like the other, you know; so that, altogether, I am so confused and flustered that I can't make out for the life of me what it all means."

"Did they not tell you why Remi Largeval was no longer Remi, but had become George in prison?"

"Yes, they certainly told me some rigmarole that was supposed to explain everything; but all I gathered was that M. George, who died here, is not dead at all, while M. Remi, who wasn't dead at all either, has been buried months ago."

"It does not seem particularly clear," Montussan remarked, with an affectation of profound muddleheadedness.

Prudent Pascalin lowered his voice mysteriously.

"Do you know what I think, sir?"

"I do not; but I do not mind hearing."

"Well, these two brothers, the Largevals, are a couple of cunning rascals who are just leading all the police astray, and laughing in their sleeve at them. My idea is that they are not dead, neither the one nor the other, and that both are up to their ears in all kinds of abominable crimes."

Montussan laughed loudly.

"Aye," he said, "I should not wonder. You've hit the right nail on the head."

"The only thing that distresses me is that I can't sleep quietly in my lodge now. I'm always imagining that the garden is full of burglars, and that I'm going to tread on a corpse every step I take. Just now, for

instance, I shall be obliged to go and shut the shutters of the cottage—I opened them this morning to air the rooms. Well, I don't like it at all, sir; not at all."

"You're afraid?"

"Well, not precisely afraid. But—but it's a nasty, nervous kind of errand, you know."

"I see. Perhaps I might do it for you?" Montussan suggested negligently.

"Oh! would you be so very good, sir? You're an artist—a painter, I think?"

"No; a photographer."

"Ah! that's a good trade, I've heard. And they're such lively chaps, too. I ought to have known it by your beard."

"So you ought."

"So you wouldn't really mind shutting the shutters of M. Largeval's cottage? Ah! after all, I can't help regretting him."

"Which, the dead one?"

"Oh! I don't know which. One was as freehanded as the other, as far as I am concerned."

"Give me one of your lanterns to help me find my way through the garden, and prevent me tumbling about over the furniture."

Pascalín rose, and put a lighted candle-end in a lantern, which he handed to Montussan.

The Bohemian walked tranquilly towards the Largevals' former habitation.

Prudent Pascalín rubbed his hands, delighted in the first place to be absolved from the necessity of moving

at all ; secondly, to be saved from the terror of an excursion into the dark garden and deserted house.

Montussan was troubled by no tremors ; he shut the shutters, but he was in no hurry ; indeed, he walked coolly down to the cellar, where the most terrible episode of the drama which we are describing had been enacted, and gravely and leisurely he surveyed the scene. In the same methodical fashion he went up to the ground-floor again, explored the room where Largeval had fallen dead, and minutely examined the camphor-wood box in which the cipher-letters were discovered.

Lastly, he sauntered back to the porter's lodge, after having paid particular attention to the lock of the cottage-door.

The porter gave a sigh of relief on seeing him reappear, and inquired anxiously whether he had seen anything.

"No ; why ?" Montussan returned.

"Because you were such a time, and one doesn't know what may happen in horrid places like this."

"Oh ! I amused myself retracing the way we took the other night when the two men got in, and nobody would believe me."

"Ah ! you call that amusing yourself !" Pascalin remarked, looking at him curiously.

"Well, it interested me at anyrate ; and I looked over the house, too, just to see how Largeval managed to secure his two victims."

"Did you remark anything during your journey ?"

"Nothing much ;—but I say, concierge, you know that

your tenant was one of the most accomplished scoundrels unhung—you must know it, I say."

"I—know it?" the fat Cerberus gasped.

"Yes, you."

"Come now, that's a good joke."

"Joke! you call it. I am not the man to betray you; but you yourself allowed that Largeval was strangely freehanded with you."

"That's true; he never let a week pass without giving me something."

"Exactly; and whom will you persuade that it was not to his interest to keep well with you? Men do not fee their concierges like that for nothing. If I were you, I would not insist quite so loudly that you never suspected anything. People may begin to think you were in the business with him."

Pascalín leapt from his seat with a cry.

"With him!"

"Well, his accomplice."

"Don't say things like that, sir, don't!"

"I am not the only person that says them."

"Who is it dares accuse me? Make me the confederate of that miserable murderer, that thief, that swindler . . ."

"There, you see you know exactly what to call him."

"But it doesn't prove that I knew anything about the villain's misdeeds at the time."

"Humph!" ejaculated Montussan doubtfully.

"Hum and ha as much as you like, it's the truth," roared Pascalín, in a state of wild trepidation.

"Well, they say at the Prefecture that you were singularly indulgent towards your tenant in the evidence you gave."

"Well, I didn't want to make his case worse."

"Why not?"

"I had no reason for wishing to injure him."

"Do you think he would have spared you?"

"Come, what is it you want after all?" demanded the concierge, frightened and impatient at the same time.

"I will tell you what I want, M. Prudent Pascalin," said the Bohemian mysteriously.

"I should like to hear it, sir; speak, and speak up, if you please."

"As to that, Pascalin, I shall speak as I like. From men like you men like myself are not in the habit of accepting advice or criticism; understand that."

Pascalin understood; and the firm, cool words acted like a douche on the little spirit of which he could boast. Lucien dipped his fingers into his pocket and drew out a napoleon. The concierge's little eyes lit up hungrily. He looked at the coin and then at Montussan; returned to the money, tendered his hand, and withdrew, and then finally made a plunge at the gold, and pocketed it.

"You see I am not such a very bad fellow," said the donor slyly.

"Who could ever have thought you were, sir?"

"Well, my man, I should be deucedly pleased to see Largeval condemned."

"Oh! I fancied that you were dreadfully grieved the day they arrested him."

"All a feint. . On the contrary, I came here expressly to see that he was really taken off to Mazas safe and sound."

"I see," emitted Pascalín, who looked anything but sagacious.

"Largeval, you know, is a thorough villain, without shame and without scruple. You need not hesitate, therefore, about telling everything you know against him, —the worse the better. You might even touch up a reality here and there;—follow up the facts which you know to their probable consequences, there is no harm in that."

"Sir," said the concierge almost indignant, "if I understand you, you want to make me perjure myself!"

"You are quite wrong, my dear fellow."

"Aye, but . . ."

"I want you to arrange the facts which you know in such a way that they will not be of any use for Largeval's defence, that's all."

The Bohemian produced another piece of gold, and again the covetous sparkle came to Pascalín's little porcine eyes; this time, however, he took the money without a moment's hesitation.

"What I propose, you see," Montussan went on in a calm and composed voice, "is perfectly fair and honest."

"Do you think so?" said Pascalín dubiously.

"Of course I do; nobody could doubt it. Your

former tenant is an enemy of society, a rebel against the laws."

As he spoke, a smile of superb sarcasm curled the Bohemian's lips, a smile that Pascalín could not, and was not required to understand.

"Largeval, as I was saying, is a rebel against all human and divine laws. Your duty as a citizen—a citizen occupying an important function in civilisation—is to do your utmost to punish this man."

Pascalín nodded vacantly. The argument sounded reasonable and, above all, flattering for himself; it was not necessary to comprehend.

"You will thus render an immense service to society," continued Montussan, his smile waxing harder; "and the day when you render testimony before the judge at the assizes, you will be one of the most important personages in the country, since in your hands will be the lives of all the victims which Largeval is sure to make if he is allowed to go free; that is no light responsibility, M. Pascalín."

The porter began vaguely to understand; he smiled fatuously, reflecting on the importance of his position.

"Besides," Lucien added, lowering his voice, "the day Remi is condemned . . ."

"You are quite sure that it is M. Remi?" the concierge asked.

"Of course; but the scoundrel is so sharp that he might manage to deceive everybody if you were not there to recognise him."

"I don't mind recognising him," the concierge returned.

"The day he is condemned, then, there will be five hundred francs for you."

"Five hundred francs!" echoed Pascalin, dazzled.

"On the nail!"

The concierge thought for a moment, and then said dubiously—

"But I have already made a statement which is altogether in his favour."

"You must think better of it, then," said Montussan, with a joyful light in his eyes. "You can explain that you were unwilling to injure a man who had been so generous to you."

"It is rather a dirty business, though," Pascalin could not help objecting.

"It would be if Largeval were not a worthless ruffian. Were an innocent man in his place, my advice would be diametrically opposite. As it is, you assist society in suppressing a thoroughly gangrened and poisonous member."

He added under his breath—

"It is astonishing how eloquent I am growing. You might take me for the fifth part of a criminal pleader."

Two napoleons in his pocket and a near prospect of five hundred francs, were arguments which the concierge did not attempt to resist. He promised all the Bohemian wanted; and the latter departed rubbing his hands, and satisfied with his evening's work.

XXVIII.

MONTUSSAN seemed in no hurry to rest after his oratorical and diplomatic efforts. He directed his steps not to Riaux's studio, where he had recently been in the habit of sleeping, but to Montmartre, where he possessed a little room at the top of an old house of the Rue des Abbesses.

It was a curious chamber on the sixth floor, wherein the Bohemian had accumulated a characteristic chaos of discordant objects. From the window he could enjoy a wide and wondrous spectacle when he deigned to come home.

All Paris with its myriad lights was stretched out before him. And, like one of Balzac's heroes, he might have launched into some mighty moral monologue, contemplating the busy hive beneath him.

But Lucien was not addicted to romantic soliloquy. He simply sat down to inhale the pure breezes that blew about his eary. Then he fell to thinking over his plans for the future.

Now and then a low, little laugh interrupted his self-communion. But there was nothing demoniacal about the sound, and he did not consider himself in any way com-

pelled to adopt the pose of a vanquished Titan, or a Lara at war with the world.

Neither was there bitterness in his eye or in his mind. His was a robust philosophy, acquired and proved in a hard school. The die was cast; he was going to accept his fate frankly, without looking back. If he had not yet burnt his boats, it was because he was sure of himself and knew that he would not fly to them, come what might.

During the greater part of the night he remained plunged in thought, perfecting projects ready for immediate execution.

At four o'clock, in the grey light of dawn, he wrote a few strange lines on a sheet of paper, which he proceeded to half destroy by holding it in the flame of his candle. When the scrap was well alight he let it drop, and crushed the flame out with his foot. Narrowly examining the fragment that remained, he murmured with apparent satisfaction—

“That ought to do.”

Then he threw the blackened morsel—where a few lines were yet half visible—into the grate, where he covered it with ashes.

After having accomplished this, he emptied his pockets of several singular objects, and locked them up in a drawer. He had taken his hat and was on the point of departure when some sudden thought restrained him. He looked round, seeking something; and presently, in a trice, he had taken down two or three little pictures, and ran-

sacked his drawers for some old faded relics that were probably family mementoes. He made a neat parcel of all these things, and, to complete his removal, dragged out of a cupboard an old portfolio gaping with innumerable sketches and manuscripts.

"Poor humanity! *vanitas vanitatum!*" he murmured, smiling to himself; "I cannot stand the thought of their being forgotten."

But despite his sceptical mockery he took his bundle under his arm, and walked serenely down to Riaux's studio, where, in spite of the fever that throbbed in his every vein, he managed to sleep for several hours.

The day was uneventful. He remained at his easel until dark. His gaiety had revived, and albeit alone, he talked and sang, and cracked broad jokes.

Now and again Geneviève's name would recur to his mind, would be on his lips; but he spoke it calmly, joyously, with no accent of rancour in his voice.

His food was brought to him in the studio, and he ate it without laying aside his palette. After dark he went to the Rue des Abbesses in order to ascertain whether anything had come for him.

During four or five days he lived this life. He had not returned to the Rue Racine, and Madam Largeval and Geneviève hearing nothing of him were wondering whether this silence and this mystery were to continue during the execution of his famous plan.

On the sixth day Montussan received what was evidently an anxiously expected message, for as he opened it he breathed a sigh of relief—

"At last!"

And then, after a brief pause, he added—

"My poor Geneviève, you shall see how I can love."

The paper was simply a summons requesting Montussan's attendance at the Palace of Justice, as a witness in the Largeval case. His presence was required the next day at one o'clock in the afternoon; and at that hour exactly the Bohemian was pacing the long gallery into which the Judge of Instruction's offices opened. Of course he was desired to wait. M. Méstras was closeted with the Commissary of Police, who had conducted the preliminary inquiry into the mystery of the Rue Serpente, and whom Montussan had succeeded in seriously offending.

The interview was a long one. Montussan, whose impatience was apt to boil over in furious words and energetic gestures, remained tranquil and uncomplaining as a nun. He asked no question of the ushers, but quietly waited his turn, which came at last, as most things will, even in this world.

He appeared before the Judge of Instruction, and immediately the Bohemian recovered all his careless gaiety, his cynical indifference, the impudence with which of yore he was accustomed to intimidate hores and fools.

The magistrate remarked this attitude at a glance, but knowing something of the witness's career and habits, he felt and showed no surprise. What he had heard of the Bohemian's history was not in his favour, and with a person for whom he had very little esteem or sympathy,

he allowed himself to assume a somewhat peremptory manner.

"You are M. Montussan, I believe?"

"I am, sir."

"You exercise no profession or calling, I think?"

"That is a line of thought I would not pursue if I were you, sir; it's misleading. I have a profession. I am an artist."

M. Mestras frowned with offended dignity.

"You are here as a witness, and I recommend you to be careful as to the manner in which you address me."

"I did not know that I showed great carelessness in risking a small joke."

"Your joke, as you call it, is in very bad taste, and this is no place for it."

Montussan assumed an expression of wounded vanity, without abandoning his free and easy air of irony. He put on an exaggerated affectation of modesty, and waited.

"Sir," the magistrate resumed somewhat irritably, "be good enough to tell me in your own words what you had to do with the entrance of the two thieves in the garden of the Rue Serpente. Or perhaps you would rather that I should question you."

"To tell you the truth, sir," Montussan replied easily, "it is a matter I have not thought over, but I do not care which way it is. But, perhaps, if you questioned me, I should be less apt to stray into unnecessary details."

"Perhaps you are right. Tell me then what was your

motive in following those two men to Largeval's garden?"

"In the first place, sir, I only followed one, and an exhausting chase it was. On his way, however, this man found time to leave an inscription on the table of a tavern, and this curious communication led me to suppose that he soon would be joined by a confederate; which indeed he eventually was."

"Here is a hat that belonged to one of the men. Do you recognise it?"

"Perfectly. The bigger ruffian of the two wore it."

"Ruffian! As yet you can know nothing positive about these men."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Montussan cavalierly.

"We will call them the two victims for the moment, if you please. That they assuredly were."

"As you please, sir. I shall be delighted to employ that dainty euphemism in honour of their sainted memory."

Lucien's tone began seriously to anger the magistrate, whose face became sterner at every light and flippant word which the Bohemian emitted. It was evident that a collision between judge and witness was imminent.

"Just tell me what your impression was when you first found yourself in the presence of Remi Largeval?"

"Shall I tell you all my thought?"

"Certainly."

"Well, the impression was not at all favourable. There was something radically false in the man's face. And as I went away accompanying the constables to the

Commissary of Police's office, I felt convinced that the tenant of the cottage of the Rue Serpente had himself admitted the two men."

Montussan spoke in the first person singular, seeming altogether to ignore the fact that Riaux had accompanied him.

"Have you seen this Largeval since?" the magistrate demanded.

"Yes, sir, several times."

"Has it ever occurred to you that he might not be the same man whom you saw on the night of your—your adventure?"

"Never, sir. I am perfectly convinced that the Largeval of that night is the Largeval whom I saw arrested and carried off to Mazas."

"Ah, by the by, sir, it appears from a report, and from the testimony of the Commissary of Police, that your behaviour was anything but orderly and respectful at the moment of Largeval's arrest."

"That is to say, that the Commissary was anything but civil to me. He even went so far as to threaten me with arrest."

"I daresay; your attitude . . ."

"Allow me: an attitude as far as I know does not excuse an abuse of authority or an arbitrary act. I had nothing whatever to do with Largeval's crimes; and I cannot understand how any man exercising legal functions like those of a Commissary of Police could dream of arresting a man because of—an attitude."

He spoke with singular heat, with an animation that

seemed out of all proportion to the subject. His exaggerated indignation made M. Mestras look up in surprise, though his reply was perfectly cool and deliberate.

"As a matter of fact, sir, the police, when they found you scaling a wall at two o'clock in the morning, might have taken you into custody and kept you in gaol a good deal longer than you imagine."

Montussan was evidently taken aback by this piece of information.

"The fact of climbing a wall in itself is distinctly a serious misdemeanour . . ."

"Yes, when the intention is robbery."

"When the intention is robbery, it is felony."

"Come now, that is too strong."

"Witness," M. Mestras remarked severely, "once or twice in my presence you have used expressions which may suit the companions of your debauchery, or a vagabond painter's studio—I shall not tolerate them here."

"I beg your pardon, sir; but I, on my side, do not allow your right to address me in those terms. If debauchery were a crime or a misdemeanour, well and good, you might have an inquiry to conduct; but as it is . . ."

"Silence, sir!"

"And if debauchery were proved, you might condemn me. But until it is a crime, and is proved—be good enough to address me in a more polite fashion."

M. Mestras had expected to meet a man of eccentric but easy and jovial manners, a scamp perhaps, but not a bully. Montussan's insolent resistance irritated him

beyond measure ; the Bohemian had the appearance of utterly scouting and flouting the majesty of the law, and that a conscientious magistrate could scarcely brook. He began to conceive a violent prejudice against the witness, whose mocking smile never left him, strange contrast though it formed now and then with the violent terms and tone of some of his speeches.

"After all," Lucien went on in a taunting voice, "nobody can accuse me of anything, try as hard as they may. Remi Largeval is caught, and everybody knows that he is an unmitigated scoundrel who murdered his accomplice in that gambling den business."

"Hillo!" exclaimed the magistrate involuntarily, "how did you manage to know of that?"

"Why should I not know it?" said the Bohemian.

But his bold eyes fell, he bit his lips, and it was with some difficulty that he reassumed the noisy effrontery that became him so ill.

"Answer me, witness," said the magistrate, rebuking his insolence by a haughty gesture, and an imperative tone, "how did you know that Largeval was said to have murdered a man some years ago in a gambling house?"

"What can it matter to you how I found it out? And why do you say 'was said?' is said should be the word, the man is not guillotined yet, eh?"

"You seem to know a vast number of things, and yet you are ignorant of the fact that the Largeval, who is imprisoned at Mazas, is not Remi . . ."

"And whom do you make him out to be, I should like to know?"

"George Largeval."

"Who has been telling you that? And you do not mean to say that you believe it?"

"Innumerable circumstances point to its being the positive truth," the magistrate answered, subduing his indignation in the interest of his duty; and ignoring the fact that he was entering into a discussion with his extraordinary witness.

"Somebody has been taking an unfair advantage of your innocence," said Montussan, with an exasperating sneer; "it is too bad of them, they ought to have spared you that."

"Will you be silent!" exclaimed the magistrate furiously; "I am the only judge of what is important or trivial, of what is credible or false, in the evidence that is brought before me."

"I do not deny that."

"I must point out, too, that through the loose and improper way in which you obtrude your sentiments, which are of no use whatever to any one, your examination threatens to last all day, and that fruitlessly."

"Well, what is the use of examining me, after all?" the Bohemian returned lazily; "you have got a full report of everything that was done on that never-to-be-forgotten night, and . . ."

M. Mestras stopped him with a gesture of angry impatience.

"It is not my office to enlighten you any further," Lucien persisted. "When I speak of Remi being alive, Remi Largeval, the blackest scoundrel who ever picked

oakum, you come and tell me that it is not true ; that some impossible resemblance has allowed one brother to assume the name and position of the other. Look here, this is about the real fact, sir, the brothers are simply both of them laughing at you."

Heartily sick of his witness, the magistrate was about to dismiss Montussan, but the Bohemian allowed him no time.

He began a furiously violent philippic against Largeval, an official prosecutor's denunciation, clear, precise, pitiless, in which he demonstrated with convincing ingenuity that the accused man, one of the cleverest swindlers in France, had easily succeeded in deceiving the Judge of Instruction.

With an eloquent flow of ardent words, words that betrayed a personal animosity against Largeval, and an inexplicable and incomprehensible longing for his death, Montussan heaped proof on proof, and reason on reason, until the judge stared at him with admiring wonder.

But he concluded his diatribe with an unfortunate and unguarded sentence.

"And finally, sir, was not Remi Largeval recognised by a man who has known him for years, by a man who could not be mistaken as to his features—by Rouillouze, in a word?"

The magistrate rose, pressed a button in the wall, and an electric bell sounded at some little distance. A policeman presented himself at the door and saluted. M. Mestras made a rapid sign, without opening his lips, and the soldier withdrew.

Montussan was still smiling, but the gaiety was in his eyes, not on his lips.

The magistrate turned towards him sharply. This was the first advantage he had obtained against the ne'er-do-well.

"And so, M. Montussan, you know Rouillouze too?"

"I . . . I did not say that," Lucien exclaimed with desperate eagerness.

"You deny having said that?" the astonished magistrate demanded.

Montussan's manner became more embarrassed as he answered with only a shadow of his former impudence :

"I did not say so, I think."

"What did you say, if you please? How do you know the name of Rouillouze,—a man whose life has been spent amid the dregs of all that is vile in Paris? And, above all, how do you come to know what his testimony was against Largeval?"

Montussan hesitated, and M. Mestras triumphed.

At last the witness stammered :

"I heard the story told by some journalist."

"Where?"

"In a café."

"What café?"

The judge's questions came thick and fast. It was evident that his object was to leave the Bohemian no time for reflection or invention. Lucien blurted out a few words, then suddenly conquering his nervousness, replied with all his old impudence.

"What café? I am sure I do not know. A man like .

myself haunts pretty well every café in Paris, and to lay his finger on the precise one where he heard certain words uttered would be a feat of memory beyond his powers."

"But the story must have made some impression on you. You must be able to give me the name of the reporter whose gossip enlightened you."

"No ; I do not remember it. It is unfortunate, but I do not.

"Be very careful about this. Your declarations are very serious indeed ; and they may compromise you to a degree that you do not seem to apprehend."

"Compromise me !" exclaimed the Bohemian lightly : "that is a good joke. It does not disturb me, I can assure you."

"And so you do not remember the name of the journalist who told you Rouillouze's name ; and you are ignorant of the nature of the evidence which he has given ?"

"No ; I have told you that I do not remember it."

"Well, that is not at all extraordinary, M. Montussan," said the Judge of Instruction, sneering in his turn.

"Why ?"

"Because no journalist, nobody, save persons connected with this case, has been told the circumstances that you appear to be so familiar with."

"Well, it is the truth for all that !" said Lucien with stubborn sulkiness, yet evidently ill at ease.

"Have you seen Madam Largeval ?"

"Certainly."

"When ?"

"Three weeks ago."

"Very good. And now, M. Montussan, what would you think of a man who knew what you have just told me when it was materially impossible that anybody save the chief actors in the affair could have instructed him?"

"I do not quite understand your question," Lucien said with more spirit.

"I will try to make myself understood."

"I shall be eternally grateful."

"One witness, then, exhibited an extraordinary animus against Remi, and that was Rouillouze, whose name you know so well."

"I am agreeable. What does it prove?"

"Is it not singular that you who know him—there can be no doubt about that—are the one other witness equally bitter against the accused?"

"I do not see the singularity at all," said Montussan with cool deliberation. "You cannot deny that Lorgeval received his two victims—these are your own words you know—into his house, hid them in his cellar, and let them starve to death—which is a nasty cruel way of doing the business. Later on it was discovered, through documentary evidence I think you call it, that he was intimate with two blackguards, Tricart and Perlot, and that they had threatened to denounce him. It is equally certain that this wretch murdered a poor devil, nearly related to his brother, and that in a way which indicated an unusual familiarity with the ways of getting a friend out of the world. And after all that, you come and ask me what I think!"

M. Mestras listened with imperturbable coolness. Montussan went on in an easy conversational tone.

"My innate curiosity and a habit of prowling about at night, that all my friends know I possess, led me to follow Tricart. I saw him join Perlot ; I saw him climb over the wall of the Rue Jardinot ; I was nearly imprisoned as a burglar myself, and yet you are astonished that I should be rather irritated against your Largeval !"

"Very good ; but all that does not explain how you came to know Rouillouze," the magistrate retorted with pertinacity.

"Well, just listen," said Montussan, who had apparently taken counsel with himself, and come to a different determination : "I know you will be imagining all kinds of unpleasant impossibilities, so I may as well tell you that I did know the man Rouillouze some time ago."

"Aha, you confess," the exultant magistrate exclaimed.

"Aye, and it does not cost me a terrible effort to do it."

"Where and when did you know him ?"

"Oh, a long time ago ; I cannot tell you the exact date, but it must have been about 1872, or a little earlier."

"I see that every word must be wrung from you. You do not say where you knew him."

"Oh, at a card club."

"You mean a gambling den ?"

"That is the same thing."

"You are a gambler ?"

"Now and then. I have done a little baccarat in my time ; but I am not what you could call a gambler.

For one thing, in order to gamble, one must have money ; and I have never had much of that about me."

"We will verify all this later on. A few words more. An acquaintance with Rouillouze, dating from six or seven years ago, does not account for your knowledge of what he told me during his examination the other day."

"Oh yes, it does perfectly ; if you only look at it in the proper light," said Lucien, who appeared to take a malicious pleasure in reverting to his flippant carelessness just at the point where the judge desired him to be most serious."

"I hope that you are not going to adopt that absurd and provoking tone again. Let me tell you that you are very seriously interested in all this—far more seriously than you think."

"The explanation lies in a nutshell," Montussan answered sullenly. "Cannot Rouillouze have told me Largeval's story, chatted to me about the man, seeing him come into the club, or hearing his name mentioned? Could not I have questioned him about his friend, eh? That is how it really did occur—the thing is simple enough."

"Yes ; but you pretended that you had never seen Largeval before ringing him up that night at his own house."

"Was it likely that I should tell the Commissary, who was already prejudiced against me, that I happened to meet some years before a man who appeared to have a number of the most serious charges against him?"

"You are a remarkably prudent gentleman," remarked the judge with quiet sarcasm.

"I am, now and then, for a change," the imperturbable Bohemian retorted.

"Well, sir, I am sorry to say that your explanations are anything but clear and satisfactory."

"That is because you will not be satisfied, or cannot see their clearness."

"No; but because it is evident to the meanest capacity that your chief aim in all this is to make the case against the accused as heavy, as unanswerable as possible. His attitude is that of innocence, you would make it one of blackest guilt."

At these words Lucien threw himself back and indulged in an indecent demonstration of derision, laughing loudly and cracking his finger-joints with insolent enjoyment.

"And so you believe Largeval to be innocent!" he chuckled at last.

M. Mestras scarcely heeded him; he was thinking deeply. He remembered all that had passed between George and Madam Largeval on the very spot where the Bohemian had answered so evasively, had exhibited such an utterly cynical contempt of truth and justice.

It occurred to him, as it would have occurred to duller minds, that Rouillouze, and maybe the Bohemian, might be actuated by some thirst for vengeance against Largeval, and that there was a plot between them to send him to the scaffold. The animosity evinced by both was very remarkable; the persistence with which they

maintained that he was Remi seemed suspicious. The magistrate contrasted with this evident malice, this dogged obstinacy, Madam Largeval's spontaneous cry of love, her accent of unmistakable sincerity, and he could not restrain the pity with which the husband and wife so persecuted inspired him.

For a time his most ardent wish had been to save Largeval, even from the consequences of his fraud and forgery; that wish was again warm within him, as he watched the malicious manoeuvres of the hardened debauchee before him.

His profession had accustomed him to think clearly and rapidly, and the silence that succeeded Montussan's outburst of ribald laughter was of brief duration.

"I am not here to answer your questions, witness. The establishment of Largeval's innocence or guilt will result from the inquiry which I am conducting at this moment."

Lucien began to fling his limbs about impatiently, yawned, and evinced by other means, more emphatic than polite, that he had had enough of the law and its ministers.

"What has been your means of livelihood during the last seven or eight years?" was M. Mestras' next question, put firmly and abruptly.

"What is the object of your question?"

"That has nothing to do with you; answer me."

"Are you trying to intimidate me and make me believe that some dreadful penalties are suspended over my unfortunate head?"

"I request you to answer."

"So I am now to be treated, formally, as an accused person?"

"Not yet," retorted M. Mestras bluntly. "But I may tell you that your fate very probably depends upon your answer."

"That's it, is it? I see it all clearly enough. And I tell you, sir, that you may do your worst, but you must do it according to rule. Issue your warrant for my apprehension—now—here . . ."

The magistrate answered with perfect patience—

"You decline to tell me what your means of existence have been during the last six or seven years? You positively refuse?"

"No, I do not," answered Montussan somewhat cowed. "But your question is ridiculously superfluous; you know perfectly well that I have led a rather irregular life."

"Proceed."

"And—and—well; yes, I am rather embarrassed. It is a decidedly difficult task to enumerate all the ways in which I have earned my living during the last eight years."

"Why is it difficult?"

"You know that well enough. Because I have always been a Bohemian, in the largest sense of the word. Here and there I have rendered a chance service to this or that chum, and this or that chum has been good for a few napoleons. I have picked up money—not much—in the same way that some men pick up rags. And

that money has kept me in food—and, above all, in drink; for I will not conceal the fact, sir: if I have one weakness, it is punch."

"That is enough. You can withdraw," said M. Mestras, turning coldly away from the Bohemian.

"What! you are not going to arrest me? This is boundless mercy."

"I ought to arrest you for the insolent fashion in which you have made light of your solemn obligation to help the cause of justice. But you have probably had too much punch, and your examination is at an end. Leave the room."

Montussan looked thoroughly satisfied. Putting his hat on with jaunty insolence, he sauntered away with his hands in his pockets.

XXIX.

At the moment when Lucien left the Palace of Justice, swinging his cane triumphantly, a crafty-looking individual stole down the steps after him, and commenced a conscientious though discreet pursuit of the erratic Bohemian.

Montussan had noticed the stranger, but he only betrayed his knowledge by a slight smile.

Without turning his head or changing his step he strolled towards the river. Here his pace, his manner, was more languid and leisurely than ever. He stopped and watched every cork floating in the current, compared the rate of progress of the river steamers, looked at the books sold on the parapets of the quays, and in this apathetic fashion made his slow way towards the quarter of the Hotel de Ville.

When he had reached the Rue Saint Antoine he stopped, and after hesitating a moment, turned his face towards the Bastille, and suddenly entering the Saint Antoine suburb made for the exterior boulevard.

If his capricious zigzags were conceived with a view to the discomfiture of the spy on his track, his pains were fruitless.

Steadily and patiently the man followed, like one

accustomed to such exercises, like one who took a conscientious pride in acquitting himself well of a delicate but unavoidable duty.

After many a perplexing, and to some people exasperating, roundabout way, Montussan arrived at the boulevard of La Villette, and entered a dark and notorious wine-shop of evil repute, where he ordered drink with the air of an habitual customer, and easily fell into conversation with the choice spirits of the villanous company assembled. His geniality was appreciated, and his invitation to drink all round 'did not lower him in the eyes of his associates. He happened to be observed by the spy in charge of him at the moment when his hospitality had brought him into more cordial relations with the desperadoes around.

The spy made a note, and Montussan indulged in a smile.

Presently he rose and with a cordial grin saluted the company, and left the den of thieves.

With a sigh of relief he walked straight, and this time with a quick and unhesitating step, to Riaux's studio, where he spent the night dreaming of Geneviève and talking madly to her effigy.

The next morning when he went to his own home—if home it could be called—he remarked with amusement that his concierge's manner towards him had changed considerably for the worse.

The portress had never regarded her eccentric lodger with a very profound esteem or affection. Now her demeanour was positively offensive. Her look of horror

and repulsion appeared to impress the Bohemian as something wonderfully comic, for he laughed heartily as he asked—

“Good gracious me, Madam Lelarge, what an expression! and what eyes! Are you taking lessons in tragedy?”

“Sir,” the woman answered solemnly, “I will thank you not to address me in that way. I won’t allow any familiarity between us.”

“Familiarity, my dear Madam! mine has been a distant, a silent devotion. Have I not always been respect itself?”

“I say nothing about respect, sir.”

“Well, what? You look as if you would like to eat me alive. The idea of that anthropophagy terrifies me, Madam Lelarge. I should be sure to disagree with you. Has anybody been taking liberties with my character?”

“Ah! it is more serious than that,” the beldam said.

“You cannot mean it?”

“Much more serious.”

“Then suppose you tell me the reason of your profound indignation.”

“Sir, the police have been here.”

“Here? Well, what did they want, and what has that to do with me?”

“They wanted your room, sir. There!”

And the woman emitted a snort of triumph. Lucien grinned.

“My room! the saints defend us! and I have not made my bed for the last three weeks! The police must

have been scandalised. And can you tell me, Madam, what they happened to want in my humble garret?"

"They came on a domiciliary visit, with a search-warrant or something."

"Dear me. Do you think that they can have taken me for a political celebrity?"

"I don't think so."

"And why not? Madam Lelarge, you seem to know a good deal more about it than I do."

"No, sir; only I heard one of the gentlemen . . ."

"Gentlemen? what gentlemen?"

"The gentlemen of the police," sternly returned the concierge.

"Ah! I understand. Pray, proceed."

"I heard one of them say that you were almost accused of having been concerned in a dreadful crime. And that is why, sir, I do not want to have any further connection with you."

"A crime! You're mad, my good woman. As for the connection between us, it will remain exactly what it has been, with your gracious permission, so long as I continue to lodge in this mansion. You are compelled to give me my letters, and to answer the questions of anybody who may come to see me. Don't forget that."

"I will see that the landlord gives you notice to quit."

"You may. But until I do quit, my dear Madam Lelarge, you will remain, if you please, my very humble and obedient servant."

"Your servant! Insolent fellow!"

Like a fury she shrieked, and rose and intimated that there were no letters for Montussan.

He walked away chuckling, and returned to Riaux's studio. As he was going in, however, a shabby stranger advanced, held out a printed paper, signed to a passing cab, and said briefly—

“Now, come with me. I arrest you!”

Astounded, Montussan refused to obey the police agent. The Bohemian was stoutly built, and the detective was compelled to put forth considerable strength. It had been supposed that Lucien would not resist; but resist he did, and that with a silent, furious energy which surprised his captors. After a struggle that attracted a gaping crowd, and in which several constables were constrained to take part, he was finally flung into the cab and on his way to the Prefecture.

During the brief journey Lucien renewed his attempt to escape more than once.

At last he subsided for a few minutes, and lay back as though resigned to his fate.

The agent was good-naturedly advising him to endure his lot with patience, and not to spend his strength throwing himself fruitlessly against the bars of his cage, when with a sudden movement he flung himself upon his counsellor, clutched both arms, and held him breathless under his knee.

Had the captive possessed a rope, anything capable of pinioning his custodian, the latter no doubt might have been left helpless in the cab while the prisoner escaped by some by-lane or house with a double

entry. But Montussan was, like many conquerors, unable to pursue his victory. The vanquished was tough and tenacious, and had no idea of avowing himself beaten. With a mighty effort he threw his bulky assailant off, and in his turn flung him down, and knelt upon the enemy.

And his professional prudence had provided him with the means of reaping the fruits of his conquest. He whipped a thin tough cord out of his pocket, and in a moment Montussan was scientifically trussed, and effectually saved from all temptation to measure himself against the power of the law.

He had not at all the appearance of submitting to be so pinioned. On the contrary, he laid his linked hands in his lap, sank back and half-closed his eyes with the calm satisfaction of a man who has just accomplished a disagreeable duty that he had found himself bound in honour to perform.

After the usual formalities at the Prefecture, whither he was conducted instead of to Mazas, the Bohemian was placed in a cell situated in a specially overlooked part of the prison. The selection of domicile indicated that he was regarded as more or less dangerous.

Thrust into the narrow chamber and left to his reflections, his demeanour as he looked round the forbidding walls was marked by no especial pensiveness. On the contrary, the last heavy bolt had scarcely been shot when a broad beaming smile widened his mobile lips.

"The trick is done, and everything is going on perfectly," he murmured to himself. "The chief thing, the

only thing I regret is that this blessed land of plenty does not produce punch as far as one can see. But who knows, with the help of the gold-laden mules of Philip, king of Macedonia, I daresay one may be able to supply even that deficit."

He threw himself lazily on to the truckle-bed, and looked round curiously.

"Ah! but there is another thing, a precious thing wanting. Indeed, I would do without everything else if I only had that. If Geneviève's portrait were here—even in this confounded light, everything would be for the best in the best possible prison. But maybe even that may be attained. Patience."

Having said this, he lay back thinking dreamily of the young girl whom he had just named, caring no more for his present painful, if not perilous position, than if it had been a vain vision of the night.

Early the next morning he was ushered into the presence of the Judge d'Instruction; and here, immediately, it was obvious that captivity had not tamed him.

His head thrown back, an air of haughty defiance on his face, he began speaking the first, against all judicial precedent and etiquette. Save for an inexplicable twinkle in his eye, his indignation was admirably simulated, his old experience as a mimic and parodist serving him in good stead.

"Well, M. Mestras," he began ere the gendarme had closed the door, "I suppose I may conclude that this is a little revenge on your part. You are not afraid of misusing your authority in order to vent your petty spleen

against a man who declined to be browbeaten by you,—vent it in an arbitrary fashion which I consider utterly unpardonable.”

M. Mestras looked at him dispassionately, with the clear, expressionless eye of a man accustomed to deal with perverse natures, and indifferent as to what their perversity may express.

“Your suppositions are all wrong, prisoner,” he returned in a slow, business-like tone; “it is impossible that I should ever have, ever could have, any spite against you!”

“Then why have I been arrested?” Montussan cried out violently. “Can there be any other reason save your caprice, sir?”

“Have you not an inkling of the reason? I thought you a cleverer fellow.”

“Thank you; but, clever or not, I cannot guess on this occasion, and I think that there has been a distinct betrayal of justice in your treatment of me.”

It was evident that he deliberately intended to be as galling as he could. His truculence was systematic.

“Let me give you one piece of advice,” the magistrate began.

“I would rather you gave me an excuse for arresting and imprisoning me. I shall not swerve from that point. Perhaps I may accept your advice afterwards. And I daresay I may be able to counsel you for your benefit too. Prisoners have taught judges things worth knowing before this.”

“Come, I see that you want to make your position as

bad as it can be made. And I really do not see why you should; it is already precarious enough."

"Perhaps I do want to see what is the worst one may expect at your hands," retorted Montussan with downright impudence of tone.

"You have been arrested, Montussan," M. Mestras said, looking firmly into his eyes, "because we have discovered that your part in the mystery of the Rue Serpente is a good deal more serious and important than we at first imagined."

"You discovered! What fine hunters for mares' nests you would make! I should be very much obliged if you would tell me how you reached that wonderful conclusion."

The judge declined to be irritated, or drawn into a profitless discussion: a prisoner under examination was not the same man as a witness.

"In the first place, we have ascertained beyond a doubt that you knew Perlot, Tricart, and Rouillouze a long time before the date of the Largeval mystery."

"Beyond a doubt is easily said, sir. But doubts are not so easily put aside. You'll have to establish a certainty, and you will find that deuced hard to do."

"You have always frequented company of the worst, most demoralised character."

"Ah! how delighted to hear that, all the painters and sculptors will be who could not manage to get on at all without your humble servant."

"I am not speaking of the painters and sculptors

whom you may happen to know—though one at least is very seriously compromised in this affair."

"And who is he, pray?"

"M. Riaux."

"Riaux? You do not know what you are talking about. Riaux is the most honest, the most honourable gentleman in France, sir. He is incapable of an unhandsome action. It may be that I—whose reputation is anything but spotless—am suspected, am convicted if you like, of all the crimes in the Code Napoleon,—one is never quite sure of oneself, you know;—but Riaux! Just let Riaux alone, if you please. He is above even a police spy's suspicion, as honourable a gentleman as ever had a friend who disgraced him."

He spoke with animation, with evident, palpable sincerity. Voice, expression, words and gestures, all contrasted in a startling fashion with the ill-bred, offensive demeanour of a few moments before. The change was so abrupt and complete that M. Mestras studied him curiously, and a vague suspicion traversed his mind that the man before him might perhaps be a more complex individuality than he had hitherto imagined.

"There is no charge against M. Riaux as yet," he replied after an interval.

"I should say not, indeed!" exclaimed Montussan with a scornful laugh.

"But the fact of having accompanied you to the Rue Jardinot, and helped you to get over the wall, was . . ."

"I beg your pardon, to look over the wall, if you please."

"We shall demonstrate in a moment that you probably scaled the wall, and that you certainly penetrated into the garden."

"If that were so, Riaux would have lent me his shoulders inside the garden to help me get out, not on the outside to assist me in a burglarious invasion."

"That we shall see anon."

"And apart from all this," Montussan continued confidently, "you will find it impossible to show what motive I could possibly have in engaging in a nocturnal ramble in Largeval's garden."

"There you are wrong," said the magistrate, who hoped, by condescending to discuss, to elicit some important admission from the prisoner; "there is nothing easier, and if I were you I should cease affecting to believe that experienced judicial authorities have arrested you without rhyme or reason, on a simple prejudice or supposition. We know, Montussan,—once for all understand this—we know that you are an arrogantly shameless criminal. We have proofs of what I say; and if you require any indulgence at our hands, you will only obtain it by abandoning the insolent attitude which you have maintained hitherto. It does not anger me, it disgusts me."

The lecture was sharply and severely delivered, and for the first time Montussan appeared to be really cast down and humbled, though his eyes yet twinkled curiously.

"Now," the Judge d'Instruction added, "listen to me, and endeavour not to interrupt me."

"I'll try not to do so," said the Bohemian in a low voice.

"One question beforehand: Are you disposed to confess?"

"Confess what?" exclaimed Lucien, more distressed than irritated. "I don't know what the charge is against me, and you want me to make a clean breast of it. If you charge me with having run away with the towers of Notre Dame, I declare that the police, for a wonder, have made a slight mistake, because you can see the towers from here. Besides, they were not found on my person when your agent—who is a rough, heavy-handed fellow, and ought not to be brought into contact with gentlemen—took me by the collar and flung me into a cab."

The judge stopped him with a gesture of impatience. He saw that the Bohemian's mocking mood had returned, partly in spite of himself, and he despaired of extracting anything from him save by dint of adroit and persistent interrogations.

"Montussan," he said in a quietly argumentative tone, "be good enough to listen to me. You have been connected with Tricart, with Perlot, with Rouillouze, and probably with Largeval. Indeed, you confessed to knowing these last two the day before yesterday."

"I never knew Tricart, Perlot, or even Rouillouze. The last I have seen now and then in several places, and at different times, but I have never been connected with him, as you choose to put it."

"Very well," the magistrate returned, and there was a prophetic gleam of triumph in his eye.

He opened a letter that lay before him among a number of other papers. The missive was one of those that had been found in Largeval's desk.

"Do you know anything of this?" he asked, a grave smile on his lips, and handing the paper to the prisoner.

Montussan's hand shook slightly as he took the note, and the blood left his face and lips for a moment as he looked at the secret characters.

He had to clear his throat twice, ere he could answer in his usual tone of reckless assurance—

"No, I do not know it, sir."

"You do not?" the judge replied. "But I must inform you that we have found in your room . . ."

"In my room!" echoed the apparently astounded Bohemian.

"Aye; the police have searched your room, and do you know what they have found?"

"Nothing worth much, I wager," answered Lucien, with a not very successful laugh.

"They found a half-burnt fragment of a letter, and this note is written in not exactly the same cipher as that of Largeval's letter, but in pre-arranged characters that are quite as easy to explain to any man at all experienced in such matters."

"You found a letter in my room—a letter written in a cipher something like this! It must be a mistake, or some stupid hoax."

"It is neither."

"Whereabouts did they find it?"

"In the grate."

"I do not remember keeping anything of the kind there. It does not seem the best possible place for preserving one's correspondence in, does it?"

"This fragment was buried, or, I should say hidden, under a mass of ashes and cinders."

Montussan's face lit up, and he answered expansively—

"Oh, then I will not deny for a moment that it is thoroughly possible. I have never in my life, sir, lit a fire in that stove. When I took the room, the ashes in the fireplace were exactly as your agents found them. They have not been touched. So that, if you have found anything peculiar in the grate, you had better go to the former lodger and ask him what it means."

The Bohemian threw himself back with the air of a man who has triumphantly disposed of a difficulty.

The magistrate eyed him with something like commiseration, and said half-reproachfully—

"I thought you were a man of keen intelligence, Montussan."

"And on what do you base your change of opinion? an opinion, sir, for which I feel unspeakably grateful."

"On this important fact," returned M. Mestras, still inclined to be clement in spite of the prisoner's raillery; "namely, that this fragment of correspondence, which you say can have nothing to do with you or your affairs, happens by an odd accident to speak of you."

"Of me? Indeed—that's rather more than odd."

"You are mentioned in it."

"I should like to see that."

"You shall see it presently, and under due precautions. This letter, I was about to add, shows that you were thoroughly acquainted with the person who wrote it, and whom we imagine was probably Rouillouze."

M. Mestras had admitted ignorance on one point; Montussan hastened to make the most of the admission.

"And so," he said with a superb air of disdain that made the apathetic judge's blood boil; "and so you do not even know who wrote this to me? I should like to know how you account for your ignorance on a point which even you must see to be of . . . well . . . a little importance."

"Your insolence is unbearable, prisoner, and I shall cut short this examination."

The magistrate spoke hastily, hotly, and raised his hand to press the electric bell, which was the signal for the appearance of the gendarmes.

XXX.

WITH a calm and respectful gesture Montussan begged for a respite, which, after a minute's hesitation, the Judge d'Instruction accorded. He felt a strange, strong interest in the Bohemian, despite his firm belief in the man's utter worthlessness.

"You are mistaken, sir," Lucien protested in the manner of a decorous disputant; "I do not intend insolence, there is no insolence in anything I have said. There is the heat—the undue heat perhaps—of a man who has never been accustomed to weigh his words, and who declines to be frightened by mere threats. Nothing more than that. I should be grateful if you could just take me as I am, and make the best or the worst of me—since that is the function of a Judge d'Instruction. If you would continue this discussion of the reasons which have induced you to arrest me, I feel sure the matter will soon be fully elucidated, and I shall regain my liberty all the quicker."

The little speech was perfect in tone and diction, and, forgetting his indignation, M. Mestras replied quite gently—

"Liberty? I am afraid that you need not think about

that just yet. Things do not look very hopeful for you, Montussan."

"I cannot give up hope, sir, not even though you advise me. I shall hope in spite of everything. Is that insolence, sir?"

"Hope, then, if it does you good. I do not object."

"Thank you," the Bohemian retorted, with his inimitable coolness.

"I was saying," the magistrate resumed, "that you are formally mentioned in this burnt letter."

"Formally? You mean at full length?"

"Yes, the cipher is not used in naming you. Tricart, Perlot, and even Largeval, are also mentioned in the same plain fashion. Only the sentences are so cleverly put together, and the letter is so mutilated, that it is impossible to detect whether Largeval is your confederate or your victim."

"What, another victim!" exclaimed Lucien, with a good-humoured smile; "that makes three at least. But permit me to take the beginning of your sentence. You say that Tricart and Perlot are named, also Largeval; is it not so? Now I want to know what that proves?"

"What that proves? Why, that you organised a murderous ambush into which two men—the two first—fell, and that then you had prepared everything for getting rid of your accomplice, Largeval."

"Thank you, sir. What leads you to suppose that I am as much of a Machiavelli as all that?"

"This to begin with," said the magistrate gravely.

And he drew from a drawer beside him two or three

small pieces of indented wax. Montussan glanced at them indifferently.

"What do you call those?" he inquired.

"These? They are simply wax impressions of locks that have been found in your room."

"Hark! they seem to find everything in my room. I know that I very often found nothing."

"Silence!"

"I shall not be silent. I am accused. I am a prisoner. You tell me to my face that I am nothing better than a common picklock and housebreaker, and you want me to keep silence!"

"Montussan, I say . . ."

"If I am not to hope for freedom, don't you hope for silence and meekness from me, sir. I have the right to defend myself, and I will defend myself to the last!"

"Listen, at any rate. These imprints were found in your room, carefully locked in a drawer which the police broke open. The key of that drawer was found upon you when you were taken. It is therefore indisputable that you knew of the existence of these wax impressions, and that you were perfectly acquainted with the tenor of the letter which we seized, and which probably you imagined you had burnt."

"I am astounded," stammered Montussan.

"Finally, in order that you may see clearly how all this is intimately connected with the Largeval case—which might now be called the Montussan case . . ."

"You do me too much honour, sir."

"These imprints are taken from locks in Largeval's

cottage of the Rue Serpente—the locks of the entrance-door and the cellar-door.”

Montussan threw his arms aloft with the gesture of a man who can find no words to express his surprise.

“A logician would conclude, without hesitating, that you conducted Tricart and Perlot—accomplices of whom you wished to be rid—to the cellar where thirty-two thousand francs lay buried. That gold was the bait which you laid before them. There you let them die. You had taken every precaution with a view of directing suspicion to Largeval, who, possibly, may have been your confederate in the scheme; and now you urge his guilt at every moment.”

After a pause Lucien said slowly, and without his customary volubility—

“You have not thought of one thing, sir.”

“What is that?”

“That if I were sufficiently ingenious to prepare the admirably infernal plan which you have just unveiled before me, might not somebody else have had the same idea? Am I the only man in Paris capable of conceiving it?”

M. Mestras looked long and steadily at the prisoner.

“Is it not quite as natural to suppose that Largeval, in order to dupe the police, had that letter placed in my room, and these wax impressions of his own locks in my drawer?”

“It is certainly not probable,” said the judge.

“Why not? Do you think it is beyond the capacity of a man, who was clever enough to invent a Peruvian

and an earthquake to account for his sudden possession of a fortune?"

"You are mistaken," interrupted M. Mestras; "A M. Cacerez really existed, and was in peril of his life through an earthquake. Moreover, he was a very rich man."

"Really! I should like to know who told you all that?"

"I shall not notice your effrontery, prisoner."

"Very well; the matter is of no great importance. So I drop Cacerez and return to my argument. M. Largeval knew how to utilise the time he was at liberty. He made inquiries concerning me; he discovered that my reputation was not of the very sweetest. He found out my address, and he—he simply executed the ingenious little manœuvre which you do me the honour to think I conceived. The wily ruffian argued: there's an artist with no money and no character, who has been putting his nose into matters that did not concern him. It will be easy and just to make him suffer for the crimes which I have perpetrated."

"No, no, Montussan; that was not Largeval's argument."

"May I ask how you know?"

"Moreover, it is an argument that only you could have invented," the magistrate continued.

"Well, I should like to see how you demonstrate that."

Lucien maintained the discussion with the judge with rare presence of mind and singular lucidity of intellect. Talking tranquilly, and for the most part indifferently, sometimes flippantly, he had the air of a third person

discussing a crime in the abstract over a cigar in a café.

Now and then only he seemed to awaken to a sense of the reality, to a consciousness of his position ; and at such moments he became a little more animated ; and endeavoured—it looked like an effort—to make his protestations more vehement, more impudent even.

This attitude, or rather these two attitudes, confused M. Mestras. Now and then he almost doubted. It was only when the prisoner spoke hotly and insolently that he felt certain that a guilty man was before him.

In answer to Montussan's defiance he said—

"I have an irrefragable proof against you."

"Will you produce it ? I am all ears."

"Five days ago, when you left here after your examination as a witness, you went to the Rue Serpente ?"

"I went to the . . ."

"It is useless to deny it. You saw Prudent Pascalín, the concierge . . ."

"I call him porter."

"Concierge of Largeval's former house. It was in the evening."

"Well, suppose your emissaries are not mistaken, and that what you say is the truth, what then ?"

"You gave Pascalín two louis as a bribe to induce him to give false evidence."

Montussan stared at M. Mestras in stupid surprise at first. Then presently he dropped his eyes, and his hand began to quiver nervously on his knee.

"You promised him five hundred francs."

"With what object?"

"As payment for the lies which he was to invent against Largeval," the judge responded coldly.

Lucien assumed his smile again, but as yet it was little better than the shadow of his former defiant grimace.

"This is the most serious, the most damning fact that could be brought against you," the judge resumed, confident that an end had come to his prisoner's negotiations. "If you had not invented some diabolical combination against Largeval, what would be your motive in suborning a witness to his prejudice? If you were not strongly interested in seeing him condemned, would you, would any man, have paid a poor fellow, with not two ideas in his head, to swear away the life of a man who had been in a way his benefactor?"

Montussan had recovered by this time, and he answered imperturbably—

"You have a brilliant imagination, sir, and you are good enough to invest the persons whom you examine with the same fine faculty."

"Come, Montussan, confess that . . ."

"I confess that I saw the porter Prudent Pascalin that night. But, if you will place us face to face, I defy you to get him to say in my presence that I paid him, or persuaded him to tell a lie."

"It is of no use, Montussan. We have heard the man repeat every word that you advised him to utter."

"Then you ought to know, sir," Montussan rejoined, "that I represented Largeval as a very dangerous criminal; that I taught him—as you yourself would teach

him, as it is your duty to teach him—that when he gave his evidence he was bound not to speak indulgently of a notorious enemy of social order. I told him—I don't wish to conceal the fact in the least, I rather glory in it—I told him that in hastening, in procuring the punishment of Largeval, he would be saving the victims whom Largeval would certainly prey upon if set at liberty."

"And you pretend that you had no interest at all in preaching this edifying homily?"

"None whatever. No more than you yourself have, sir, in trying to convict me at this moment. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, that is what we both aim at."

"You are utterly shameless, prisoner. I must inform you, too, that you were seen in a low café of ill repute . . ."

"Of infamous repute, if you like."

"Frequented by professional thieves; and that there you drank and clinked glasses with six or seven ex-convicts, and . . ."

"Oh, that's perfectly possible. I'll allow that, just to show you that mine is not a systematic denial through thick and thin."

"That is something gained at least."

"I am often thirsty, sir, I am thirsty now, for instance; and when that happens I simply turn into the first café I come across. As I am a bit of a gossip, and a good fellow to boot, I nearly always fall into conversation with my neighbours, and when I have any money about me, invite them to take a glass to our better acquaintance. But that does not prove that I know them."

"Your explanations are becoming a little more sincere. I wish you would be thoroughly frank, and avow the prime facts that are laid to your charge, and of which you are certainly guilty."

"I shall never confess them, for the simple reason that I am not guilty."

"Well, but you do know Rouillouze?"

"I have seen him two or three times, I tell you, under various circumstances."

"And it is he who spoke to you about Largeval?"

"Probably."

"And was it not from him that you heard the nature of the evidence which he gave?"

"Impossible, since he is a prisoner like myself."

"Oh, that does not prove the impossibility, by any means," said M. Mestras, with a wily smile.

"As you please," Montussan returned, stifling a yawn.

Despite his apparent energy, despite the vigour with which he had defended, and still appeared inclined to defend himself, Montussan's complicity in the Largeval mystery had become an ascertained fact. His knowledge might be more or less guilty, but that he had some knowledge of the crime it was impossible to doubt.

As M. Mestras had said, the basis of the accusation was that he had been seen to climb the garden wall of the Rue Jardinot at nearly the same moment as the men Tricart and Perlot, whom he was supposed to have introduced into Largeval's cottage.

In strict logic it was, of course, impossible to deduce that he was the veritable assassin of Louis Dormeau, and

that in concert with Rouillouze he was endeavouring to father this and other crimes on a former accomplice. Thus Largeval remained a prisoner on his defence as much as himself. It was very possible that the tenant of the Rue Serpente would turn out to be entirely innocent, but his innocence must be established by a public trial, and by the decision of a jury. At the present moment, facts spoke less eloquently against him than against Montussan.

Thus the Bohemian's situation was one of serious peril. This he appeared to ignore with superb quietude. During the last few minutes his serenity had become even more remarkable; he leant back in his chair, the muscles of his face relaxed and reposeful.

"There remains one more formality before I send you to Mazas," said the magistrate briskly.

Lucien exhibited not the faintest curiosity. He appeared scarcely to have heard. His gaze was lost in vacancy; his dreams were with Geneviève.

The judge rang the bell, and said to the gendarme who appeared at the summons—

"Is Rouillouze there?"

"Yes, sir; he has just arrived."

"Send him in."

And in a few minutes the meagre little miscreant, with his carnivorous expression accentuated by a sardonic grin, shuffled into the magistrate's office.

Thoroughly familiar with the forms and usages of criminal procedure, he saw in an instant that the business in hand was to procure the recognition of an old comrade,

or victim, he knew not which. But as he had never seen Montussan before, he paid little attention to him, thinking that this could not be the person whom he was to recognise, or who was to recognise him. There would be no danger from that quarter. Consequently he was considerably startled when M. Mestras, instead of addressing him, turned to Montussan, who was still lost in his daydream.

"Now, Montussan, will you look at the man who has just come into the room?"

Montussan looked up and turned round. He, too, understood that he was called upon to recognise the new-comer, and immediately he argued with himself—

"Since it is not Largeval, it must be Rouillouze."

"Do you know this man?" demanded the judge.

"Rouillouze?" said Montussan negligently. "Why, of course; did I not say so? I've not forgotten him since then."

"You know me!" cried the old ruffian shrilly, and using the familiar 'thou.'

"M. Rouillouze," Lucien declared with immense solemnity, "I will thank you not to address me in the second person singular. You must mistake me for another gentleman whom you have honoured with your friendship. I do not think that you and I have ever been on terms of intimacy, and your familiarity is offensive."

This was delivered with a haughty, authoritative accent. The old malefactor was taken aback by the dignified rebuke, but in a moment he recovered his presence of mind and answered jauntily, though evidently greatly puzzled—

"Then why do you pretend to know me? I always call the people I know 'thou.'"

"Except me; please remember that, man."

"And you, Rouillouze," said M. Mestras, "have you the audacity to pretend that you do not know Montussan?"

"How? audacity! I tell you that I have never seen the fellow; has he been telling lies about me?"

The situation was becoming farcical. Without knowing it, Lucien had placed Rouillouze in exactly the same predicament as, thanks to the old man, poor George Largeval had been in a few days before.

The practised thief and swindler of course defended himself at least as hotly as the innocent Largeval; but the result in his case was no better than it had been in that of George. M. Mestras was naturally inclined to believe him whose testimony bore out his suspicions.

Rouillouze struggled and protested, and called heaven and earth to witness that he had never seen Lucien, never heard of him. It was all in vain; Lucien, who knew the hardened ruffian whom he was dealing with, enjoyed the spectacle of his confusion, and claimed acquaintance with him with persistent energy.

Indeed with the madcap Bohemian the entire interview soon became a good joke. While the old sinner, his ferret face grown suddenly serious, was bringing forward reason after reason why Montussan must be a stranger to him, Lucien looked him in the face and with a cynical laugh said familiarly—

"Come now, old chum, what's the use of it? Drop it; the game is all up. I've made a clean breast of it. Put a good face on it, and do likewise."

"Clean breast of what?" said Rouillouze, bewildered.

"That I know you, that you know me, and that you wanted to get Largeval to pay for us all."

"That I wanted . . . Largeval . . . to pay for us all . . . I'm altogether at sea, M. Mestras."

"What an ass you must be to keep up all those ridiculous affectations, when I tell you the game's up."

"I say, you know, this is too much, hang it!" cried Rouillouze, fairly exasperated. "Somebody's being made a fool of here; and I'm hanged if I don't think the somebody's you and I, sir."

"You are doing yourself no good by adopting that system, Rouillouze," said the Judge d'Instruction impatiently. "You are recognised, and I know everything which I wanted to know."

The old gaol-bird saw a peril ahead, but the exact nature of the danger he could not distinguish.

"Very well," he said presently, "if the gentleman is so very anxious to know me, let him. He must have some reasons of his own for paying me the compliment. But I think I might ask somebody to introduce me to my friend."

"Certainly," said M. Mestras, humouring the old man, in order to bring him to the point of confession; "there is no difficulty about that. The prisoner who has recognised you is called Montussan, as you know. He is accused of having plotted with you the death of Tricart

and Perlot, who were a drag and a drain on both of you. Together you entrapped them in the cellar of the Rue Serpente; and together you manœuvred to cast the guilt of it upon Largeval's shoulders when the deed was done. Together, I may add, you will have to answer for this conspiracy, as well as for the original crime."

Rouillouze leapt from his chair, his ferret face working convulsively—

"I in partnership with that fellow! Never! Sir, I thought you knew me better; I thought my reputation was above this. I have not always been the pink of propriety, a pattern of all the virtues, but I have never been such an idiot as to go into partnership with anybody in the framing, or the carrying out of some scheme. I work single-handed when I do work."

"As you like, Rouillouze. You have made up your mind to deny everything, eh? So be it. I cannot prevent you. I am quite sufficiently enlightened, and shall now send you both back to your cells."

Rouillouze broke into loud protestations; he cried, objurgated, explained. It was no use. The Judge d'Instruction rang his bell, the gendarmes entered, and Rouillouze was compelled to follow them, exclaiming the while that everybody was mistaken. Montussan withdrew with a smile and a friendly nod to his victim.

From this moment the prosecution advanced more rapidly.

M. Mestras had the accused persons and the witnesses before him at regular periods. Largeval, Lusien, and Rouillouze appeared four or five times. Montussan per-

sisted in his part, which he played with consummate confidence and cleverness. Rouillouze, befogged and bewildered, comprehending nothing in the indictment against him, had fits of epileptic choler, of idiotic taciturnity, whenever he was taken into the presence of M. Méstras.

XXXI.

THE unhappy George Largeval, on his side, had become utterly numb and nerveless in captivity.

He had lost almost all volition and courage. He went out and came from prison to the judge's chambers without apparently caring to understand the why or wherefore of the journeys.

Now and then he murmured hoarsely to himself—

“Oh heavens! oh heavens!”

And then he fell back into his stupid inertia, having one fixed idea that he was innocent, and that some ferocious and implacable fate was forcing him irresistibly towards the steps of the guillotine, where he must expiate his brother's crimes.

Sometimes, alone in his cell, a fit of furious rage would seize him, and like a madman he would beat arms and head against the walls, vociferating frantically, until not a few of the warders maintained that his mind was completely unhinged.

“What have I ever done to deserve it all!” he whimpered. “What is the unknown error that I am made to expiate? My wife and daughter will be eternally dishonoured by a condemnation which I have done nothing

to justify. Ah! how right I was when I said that there had been a curse upon me all my life!"

The paroxysm would pass in discordant cries, in wild blasphemies, in a hurried and senseless perambulation of his cell.

And then the cold, inert stupor followed, and remained on him for four or five days, to be succeeded by a reawakening of the brain and a return to his lunatic frenzies.

But no matter what his condition might be, directly he was brought into the presence of M. Mestras he invariably sank into sullen silence. Sometimes, mechanically, he would answer a 'yes' or a 'no,' which nobody could accept as the reply of a reasoning being; generally he begged that it might soon be over, and would say nothing more.

The preliminary examination terminated, the case was laid before the Court of Accusation, whose function it is to decide, like a species of grand jury, what matters and what men must go before the open tribunal.

M. Mestras had so framed his report that it was possible that the bill against Largeval might be thrown out. But in spite of all the efforts of the Judge d'Instruction, the Court of Accusation saw too many doubtful points in the story, considered the entire case too full of contradictions, to allow one of the chief actors in it to go scot free without trial. And so the ordinary course was followed, and in a few days the three accused men were informed that they must stand their trial at the next assizes.

Montussan received the intimation with the humorous grimace familiar to his lips. George remained impassive, and said not a word. Rouillouze alone roared aloud that a fatal mistake was being made, that he protested against his trial, that he was being martyred in the interest of some unknown criminal.

He had a right to protest and appeal formally; but this proceeding only served to delay the definitive trial of the three men, which was at last fixed for the 21st of July, the fifth day of the second sessions of that month.

Montussan's arrest and imprisonment had profoundly impressed and excited the artistic circles in which the Bohemian habitually moved. During a month the newspapers were full of the sayings and doings of the erratic painter. When the charge against him was known, the general emotion waxed more profound, the public interest more intense.

And strangely enough in the hour of his danger the man found friends. Despite his whims and his incurable indolence, his debts and his drink, Montussan bore the reputation of a man of refined and honourable feeling. He had twice or thrice proved his courage and loyalty. Tales were told of him that exhibited the truculent toss-pot in a very genial and lovable light. Nearly always he had been found on the side of the weak against the strong, allied with the deserving who were helpless against the wrongdoers who were all-powerful. And all this was remembered in his favour; not all his orgies had effaced the recollection of it.

The world of art and letters in Paris, therefore, shrugged its shoulders and raised its eyebrows in mute astonishment when the news that Montussan was arrested for murder was bruited about. There were parties for and against him, as there were Guelphs and Ghibellines, Montagues and Capulets.

It was known that Montussan obstinately denied his guilt; the vast majority of the people who had known him well were convinced that the police had blundered grossly, or that Lucien was the victim of some abominable trap. A few Pharisees hinted that there might be 'something in it,' but they were in a discredited minority.

Largeval was, comparatively speaking, forgotten in the stir made about the Bohemian's name. The question of his guilt was a minor matter beside the question of Montussan's incarceration; and albeit every day the Paris journals gave column upon column to an analysis of the new *cause célèbre*, they harped but upon one name, that of Lucien Montussan.

It went so far that speculation awoke, and an enterprising picture-dealer, anxious to please the taste of the day, offered Montussan any sum which he chose to name for the paintings, the sketches, and statuary, finished or unfinished, that might be found in Riaux's studio.

The Bohemian showed the speculator to the door and desired to be left alone.

He was not lonely. Having obtained permission to paint in his cell, he worked gaily from morning till

night, singing, laughing, and cracking jokes with himself, with a light heart which few men out of prison would not have envied.

In this way he completed a fair number of pictures, which he named, classed, and catalogued, as though captivity had transformed him suddenly into a careful man of business.

"When it is all over," he thought, "they'll be able to get up a sale—and that will always be something for somebody I know."

For company's sake, as he said, he had painted another portrait of Geneviève, and if ever he was tempted to despond, a glance at this work gave him all the gaiety of his best days.

Since his last good-bye to them in their little drawing-room Lucien had held no communication with Geneviève or her mother. The promise which he had made he wilfully ignored.

During three or four days these ladies had expected M. Glossard, who would be sure to bring a word from Lucien—a word of advice, if not of news. But when the advocate presented himself he bore no message; his errand was only to confer with Laurence concerning the defence of her husband.

And then at last they heard what all Paris, what all France knew: the advocate came to them gravely one day, gravely yet hopeful, and described the new turn of affairs in all its details.

"Oh, it is not possible," cried Laurence; "they accuse Montussan now! Where will it all end?"

I know, sir, I know that the poor fellow has never been mixed up in all this infamy."

"Madam," the advocate returned with solemn emphasis: "the man is a miserable villain, who does not deserve, and will not get, the slightest mercy."

Geneviève bent her head in dumb dismay.

"Do you know what this wretch has done, whom you are inclined to defend?"

"He helped us when . . ."—Geneviève began warmly.

"He placed your husband—your father in the terrible situation where he now is," said the barrister, motioning the girl to be silent.

And then coldly, with infernal skill, he told the down-cast women everything.

"Oh, there is no doubt as to his cleverness; the combination by which your husband was to suffer for his crimes was diabolically ingenious; the conclusive proof, if proof were wanting, that he is guilty is that from the first day when he appeared before the Judge d'Instruction he has constantly accused M. Largeval in the bitterest and most violent fashion. He tried to demonstrate that your husband was Remi and not George Largeval, and, consequently, deserving of the most signal punishment."

"You terrify me!" cried Laurence.

Geneviève listened, and said nothing. Her friendship, her esteem for Montussan crumbled at each word. Lucien had made no sign—and then the lawyers could not be mistaken.

"It is even suspected," Glossard went on, "that Louis Dormeau was not murdered by Remi Largeval,

but by an old gaol-bird called Rouillouze, and Lucien Montussan."

"No, no!" cried Geneviève, "it cannot be; there is some frightful mistake, sir. He could not—he could not be the soulless villain you paint him after all he has done for my mother and me."

"What he did for you," returned Glossard, "was just an excellent means of introducing himself here,—of getting a footing in the enemy's camp."

"What are we to believe! whom can we believe!" exclaimed Madam Largeval piteously. "I cannot, I cannot bring myself to accuse him yet."

The lawyer would leave no loophole for a doubt.

"Unfortunately, Madam, the matter is one of certainty now," he said. "I was Montussan's friend; I had a sincere affection for him; I believed him guiltless as long as I could; but I declare that were he acquitted to-morrow, I would not take his hand again."

"He accused George very bitterly?" asked Laurence.

"That is all his defence."

"Oh, miserable man!"

"There was even something almost providential in the way in which he endeavoured to blacken M. Largeval."

"Providential," repeated Geneviève, thinking of the days when she was wont to call Lucien her providence.

"Yes, Mademoiselle. Montussan and his accomplice Rouillouze persist in averring that Largeval is Remi, and not your father. Well, if we know our business, we shall endeavour not to contradict them too much."

"How so?" cried Laurence. "I have declared in the most formal terms that my brother-in-law, Remi, was the blackest-hearted reprobate who ever breathed."

"You need not revert to that question; let things take their course. If you are pressed to the very last point, confess that Largeval is really your husband; but if they do not torment you too much, let his identity remain doubtful; it is the only way of saving him altogether."

"But how?"

"The charge against him of murdering Louis Dorneau and the two men in the cellar will be virtually abandoned; at any rate the jury will acquit him as Remi Largeval. If, on the other hand, he is recognised as George Largeval, he will be acquitted as a murderer, but condemned as a forger."

"But he himself has sworn that he is George, and guilty of the forgery!"

"True; but an advocate who knows his business can easily persuade a jury that, half-maddened by the unjust accusations invented to destroy him, he imagined that as the only means of saving himself."

"I understand. But then I shall be accused of perjury."

"Nobody will accuse you, Madam, of having given support to a falsehood in order to save a near relation from a shameful death."

"I will follow your directions, sir, but I confess that I begin to be dazed with this succession of strange and terrible accidents. Whatever he may have done afterwards, M. Montussan, remember, saved my daughter

from certain destruction, and then, in the most generous and delicate manner, befriended us when we were friendless."

"But pray remark, Madam, that this was after he had imprisoned Tricart and Perlot in Largeval's cellar."

"Yes; but how could he know that my brother-in-law would die that night, and that George would be mad enough to take his brother's name and place?"

"Are we certain that he did not know?" the lawyer insinuated.

"Oh, sir," exclaimed Laurence, "you are trying to prove too much."

"Well, ladies," M. Glossard concluded, "you have promised to speak when you are questioned in the sense I have indicated. That will suffice; and I depend upon you."

The lawyer went his way. Left alone, mother and daughter sat, dry-eyed and dumb, sorrowing for the traitor.

XXXII.

WHILE Montussan was acquiring a Parisian notoriety which for the moment eclipsed that of the greatest painter Paris ever heard of, his friend Riaux was tranquilly continuing his journey in search of masterpieces, or, rather, ideas for masterpieces.

He travelled directly to St. Petersburg, where he had introductions to several members of the Russian aristocracy. After a stay of two or three weeks by the banks of the Neva, during which he had looked for a letter from Montussan by every mail, he resolved to continue his journey, sending to his friend the name of a town where, and a date when, a letter would reach him.

Easy on that score, he plunged boldly into the heart of Russia, making for the Caucasus, and determined to push on to the Caspian Sea if his health and his resources held out.

At the very moment when he left St. Petersburg, Lucien was accused of the crime for which he was to take his trial at the summer assizes.

Riaux knew nothing of the arrest, or the rumours that filled Paris, for the very simple reason that for more than a fortnight he held no communication with civilised

beings, in the Western sense of the term, nor saw a French newspaper less than a month old.

One evening in the Caucasus, however, he came upon a rough inn, where two officers were installed ; they were enchanted to meet an artist, and moreover an artist from Paris. The talk flowed briskly, the laughter was merry, and the next morning the three were among the best friends in the world.

One of the Russians first put him on the track of the truth, but very vaguely, asking him whether he knew the name of a Parisian artist who had just been convicted of murder. Riaux raked his brains, but was unable to name a likely culprit. He was infinitely more interested in the scenery, in the people of the country he was traversing, than in a stray paragraph of gossip in a newspaper. The artist and the murder passed from his recollection almost as soon as mentioned.

But ere long he reached Tiflis ; and Tiflis possesses a garrison and a little court of Muscovites, who have for the most part inhabited Paris at divers epochs. These personages corresponded with friends in France, and received French newspapers ; they were, therefore, almost as keenly interested in the evolutions of the 'Largeval Case' as any drinker of absinthe under the plane-trees of the Boulevards.

Directly Riaux had been introduced into official society, he was hailed as a Parisian who might throw some light on the exotic mystery.

"Did you know an artist—or rather a Bohemian—that's how the newspaper describes him—called Mon-

tussan?" was the question a colonel of the engineers succeeded in putting before anybody else.

"Montussan . . . I should say so; he is my most intimate friend."

A dead silence fell upon the group of officers. Riaux went on without noticing the effect which his answer had produced:

"Montussan, whom you call a Bohemian, colonel, is one of the best, the most honest fellows alive."

"Then you don't—you don't know . . ." stammered an officer.

"Oh, I know that he has the reputation of being a spendthrift and a scoffer, and it is his own fault if he is generally judged far more harshly than he deserves. He is a roysterer, and he certainly drinks too much; but he is incapable of the slightest breach of honour."

"You cannot know what has happened," another of the officers remarked gravely.

"No; and of course something extraordinary must have occurred to make you acquainted with Montussan's name at this distance. What is it? Has the poor fellow shot himself?"

"Worse than that."

"Gentlemen, pray tell me at once. He is my dearest friend. I have been four or five weeks away from France, and I know nothing."

In answer to his appeal the colonel of engineers handed him a Paris newspaper, saying—

"Read the article, headed: The Largeval Case."

"Oh, I know all about that. Montussan was mixed up in it in a way!"

Riaux's answers were felt to be unfortunate. He was a friend of Montussan, the murderer, and knew all about the case! The stranger was a suspicious character, to say the least of it, and one or two severe bureaucrats were half inclined to call a couple of moujiks and have him turned into the street. A man of more charitable feelings intervened, saying—

"You cannot know what has happened, sir; that is evident. Please, read this."

Riaux opened the newspaper, and more out of courtesy than for his own satisfaction began to read the article dealing with the crime of the Rue Serpente. Then suddenly his face blanched, he rose hurriedly, and exclaimed in an accent of infinite sorrow and pity—

"My poor, poor Lucien!"

He read hurriedly the concluding lines, and turned to the colonel.

"Thank you, sir, for putting this in my way. I shall not forget the service which you have rendered me."

"What service?" exclaimed two or three Russians.

"I must leave you, gentlemen, immediately."

"Why?"

"Because I am going to Paris. I must be in time to save my friend. I can prove his innocence in two or three words."

"But they say that he has nearly confessed his guilt."

"Aye, I quite believe it. If you only knew the noble, the heroic motive that has impelled him to avow himself

an assassin, there is not one of you who would not honour his name as long as he lived. May I ask you to send a servant to order a postchaise for me? I cannot delay a moment."

The officers hastened to prepare everything for his departure. But the general curiosity was acute, and they could not refrain from questioning him.

"Ah, gentlemen, Montussan let me leave Paris alone; he remained behind in order to accomplish a madly generous, a suicidal project."

"Suicidal!" they echoed.

"Aye; and it may be more difficult than I imagine to prove that he is blameless—he has multiplied the proofs of his own pretended guilt with infernal ingenuity. But I shall succeed, I know, if I only arrive in time."

Curiosity was whetted; and Riaux was pressed to tell the entire story.

"Well, gentlemen," the painter began, "my story is partly based on supposition; but I know Montussan so well that you may safely accept my suppositions as truth. Love—love purely and simply has brought him to these straits."

"Love!" the cynical Muscovites murmured.

"Aye; you have read the charge against him, and you know the history of the mystery of the Rue Serpente which is scarcely a mystery at the present moment."

"Yes, yes," said five or six voices simultaneously.

"Well, on the famous night when they say that he opened Largeval's door and smuggled Tricart and Perlot

into the cellar, I did not leave him for one minute. He had spent the evening quarrelling with a Belgian artist, whom I can produce."

"And you are sure that he did not get into the garden?"

"As I am sure that I am at Tiffis."

"Still," said the colonel, "I do not see what love has to do with it as yet."

"I am coming to that. In the morning, after our chase of Tricart and Perlot, we met a beautiful young girl on the Boulevard Saint Michel; and Montussan was unlucky enough to save her from being crushed by a passing omnibus."

"That's one to Montussan, at any rate," remarked a lieutenant with a straw-coloured moustache.

"We took the girl home, and Lucien fell insanely in love with her."

"Aha! here comes the knotty part," put in the chorus.

"The poor fellow's passion soon became a frenzy. He painted her portrait, and that picture is worth a hundred thousand francs. I say so, and I know something about the subject," the artist added authoritatively. "He finished by regarding himself as the slave of his Geneviève."

"And did she love him?"

"I do not think so. She was engaged to her cousin; and, besides, Montussan would never avow his passion."

"Why not?"

"Because he had lived a dissolute life, and considered himself unworthy of her."

"But why should he accuse himself of imaginary crimes?"

"To save her father from the scaffold, as far as I can see. This Largeval he asserts is innocent; and a twin brother, who is dead, is the real culprit."

"Then your friend is a thorough hero of romance?"

"Alas, I am afraid he is!"

"Your chaise is ready, sir," a servant announced.

"Again, gentlemen, thanks for your information, and I trust I shall have the pleasure of meeting you again."

With numberless and warm good wishes, the officers bade him farewell.

Once in his carriage, Riaux fell to anxiously calculating.

In order to reach Paris on the 21st of July, he must stop nowhere, neither by night nor by day; it must be one unbroken journey from Tiflis to Paris. Harassed by dread forebodings, impatient, excited, ready to foam at the mouth at a second's delay, he yet determined to keep a strong curb on himself, knowing from experience that restlessness was the worst enemy to continued speed.

During a fortnight he sped towards home in vehicles of every quality and calibre, vehicles that bruised his flesh and almost broke his bones.

One obstacle after another rose up before him directly he reached civilised regions; late trains, stoppages on encumbered lines, mistakes as to luggage and passports. At last, after a fortnight of feverish anguish, he reached France; but he passed the French frontier on the night of the 22d of July.

"Too late! too late!" he muttered to himself, bursting with impatience.

At noon the train rolled into the familiar Paris terminus, where his servant was waiting for him.

"Montussan!" he gasped, without another word.

"He was tried yesterday," the servant replied.

"Was he condemned?"

"Not yet, sir. Counsel are heard to-day, and the verdict will be given."

"You have a cab here? I am off. See to the luggage."

And elbowing a dozen astonished travellers out of his way, the artist flung himself into the cab and bade the man drive to Madam Largeval's house.

He mounted the four flights of stairs without drawing breath, and rung an imperative peal.

The two women were there; they had not had the courage to spend another day of anguish in the Palace of Justice, where they had been heard as witnesses the day before. Worn out by excitement and anxiety, nauseated by the heat, and stifled by the atmosphere of the court, they returned home prostrated, and to-day they were afraid of their strength failing them in public if they should undergo the torment once more.

Geneviève opened the door. Her fair face was livid. During twenty-four hours she had been debating with herself as to whether Montussan could be really the pitiless villain whom the prosecution had pictured him. In a species of vapour eternally floating before her eyes she saw some vague outline of the truth. Sometimes she had felt impelled to rise and cry out to judge and to jury :

"You are all at fault. He is innocent, I can swear it." But then the salvation of Lucien was her father's destruction; and what proof could she give that he was guiltless, a man whom she herself was compelled to doubt at intervals? Could she proclaim it to the world, without evidence, that he was sacrificing himself for love of her?

All these problems were clashing in her aching brain when she opened the door and Riaux strode in.

"You! you here!" she cried; "oh mother, see!"

Laurence had hidden her face, fearing that a messenger had come to announce that George was condemned.

The artist spoke no word of greeting.

"You must know that Montussan is innocent," he said harshly.

Geneviève gazed up at him, her eyes heavy with weeping.

"At any rate," he went on in a somewhat softer voice, "if you do not know it, I am here to tell you so. I think that you are a good and honest girl—pardon me, I have no time for fine words—I think you are good and honest, and I must tell you this: Montussan loves you, loves you to the verge of folly. It is to save your father that he has made himself appear a thief and an assassin, and that without any hope of recompense. He is going to the galleys or to death for you."

She stood motionless, voiceless.

"I have travelled fifteen hundred leagues to save my friend; I heard of his danger by a very miracle; I dare

hope that your help will not be wanting, and that you will come with me and speak to his judges."

The artist spoke sternly, and his accent acted like a tonic on the young girl.

"It was true, then," she murmured.

"You knew it?"

"I half guessed it."

"And you will come with me?"

"I am ready now."

"Then come, and pray to God that it is not too late."

"But what more can I do for you, for him?"

"Who knows? A word, a look from you, may force Lucien to tell the whole truth."

And the painter took her by the hand as though he feared that weakness or timidity might make her fail him at the last moment.

But she followed him meekly, only murmuring as she went—

"My poor father! my poor father!"

Riaux seemed not to hear, but put her into the cab and entered himself, crying to the driver—

"To the Palace of Justice, and twenty francs for yourself if you drive quick."

In five or six minutes they were before the palace gates.

Upborne by the eager spirit within them, they mounted the long steep flight of steps and asked the first official they met—

"Where are the Assizes held? Be quick!"

With a stare of surprise he pointed to the door, and Geneviève and the painter ran towards it.

The court was full to overflowing. There had been a universal scramble for orders admitting the bearers to Montussan's trial, and this time for once few lovers of exciting and amusing trials had been disappointed. Lucien, who considered his sacrifice consummated, had conducted his defence with an easy gaiety, a ready wit, a good-humour and carelessness that delighted his audience. The light-hearted, light-headed, devil-may-care Bohemian of other days had reappeared at his best.

Only now and then, when Geneviève's name was mentioned during the course of the trial, a cloud came over his brow, and for a moment his gaze was wistful and far away.

The proceedings had not occupied much time, and if the court had consented to sit late into the night, the trial would have been over some hours before Riaux arrived.

There could be no doubt about the principal questions. Largeval was the victim of an extraordinary fatality; Montussan and Rouillouze were villains beyond all pardon. The counsel's speeches, therefore, had been comparatively brief, and the President of the Court had summed up in a very few words.

The jury had been closeted more than twenty minutes when Riaux and Geneviève reached the entrance of the court.

A bell rang, and a shiver went through the dense, half-suffocating crowd.

The jury filed in, and the judges solemnly took their seats amid a silence profound and awful.

At this moment, at one of the doors, a murmur, then

the voice of an angry dispute, was heard. Riaux was battling for an entrance.

"I can save an innocent man," he gasped.

But his voice was drowned in the usher's sonorous and reiterated cries of 'Silence!' and the foreman of the jury proceeded to read his colleagues' decision.

Respecting Largeval, the answer of the jury was 'not guilty' to every count.

Rouillouze and Montussan were brought in as guilty, with the usual 'extenuating circumstances' that saved their heads.

While the prisoners were being introduced in order that their sentence might be read to them, Riaux was wrestling with ushers and audience, endeavouring to force his way to the front. Geneviève held his hand tightly, and half suffocated, prayed the gendarmes with tears in her eyes, to admit her and Riaux.

Then the slow voice of the President was heard—

"Montussan, have you anything to say before the court pronounces judgment?"

Lucien raised his head and gazed at his judges.

"I have to say that you shall not sentence me alive."

A rapid gesture, a lightning flash of steel, a gentle smile, and Montussan sank back on his seat, the blood welling from his breast.

An indescribable scene of disorder followed. A cry of horror thrilled the air; women swooned; an indomitable commotion extended even to the platform, where the judges sat shuddering in their red robes.

The jurymen stood up pale and haggard with horror.

It was their duty to condemn, but no man imagined that he should see the sentence carried out so soon, and in such a way.

Here was Riaux's opportunity. Ignorant of what had just happened, he profited by the general disturbance to propel himself to the front, dragging Geneviève after him. Reaching the first rank, he cried wildly—

“That man is innocent!”

But almost at the same moment a graver voice announced—

“This man is dead!”

It was that of a doctor who had been called to Montussan's side.

Riaux cried aloud in his agony, and it was only by a violent effort that he retained sufficient strength to support Geneviève, who fell fainting in his arms.

The young girl was carried away, and the President ordered the court to be cleared, while justice, which pauses for no man's death, for no girl's anguish, had its way.

Montussan was not condemned; justice strikes not the dead.

When Largeval saw Montussan fall, he felt a wrench at his heart; and perhaps at that moment he understood that a man had died for him. He stood vacantly gazing at the dead man's face, while the judge pronounced his acquittal, and sent Rouillouze to the galleys.

An hour after, Riaux knelt and wept beside his friend's lifeless form.

XXXIII.

THE emotion caused by the Bohemian's death was widespread and profound. Everywhere Riaux's words as he forced his way into the court were discussed and interpreted. Friends flocked to him; and to them, in all its details, the artist told the story of his friend's sacrifice. Then even the hard heart of middle-class respectability was touched, and respectability forgave its determined enemy, the vagabond, who had known how to die so well.

An extraordinary reaction set in. The Bohemian was regarded as the martyr of his love, and all the irregularities of his life were forgiven him.

But in one house, more than in any other, his tragic end was felt—felt with something of remorse, with regret, and a grief too deep for words. That house held George Largeval's family.

Utterly broken down, George tried stupidly to disbelieve Riaux's revelations and all that his wife and daughter confided to him. The unhappy man was reduced to hoping that his saviour had been guilty!

But Laurence did not doubt for an instant. Geneviève almost believed that she had never doubted. She remained plunged in a sickening despair, weary of life,

and heavy with the weight of a fancied crime, the death of him who had saved her from death.

A new feeling had arisen in her heart, and with bitter regret she asked herself how it was that she had not divined, aye, and rewarded a love that could suffer and do so much. At that supreme moment she loved the man who would not speak his passion.

But he spoke it after death. Twenty-four hours after the trial a letter was brought to her. It had been left with the concierge by a stranger. The letter was addressed to Mademoiselle Largeval, and contained these words:—

“*MADemoisELLE*,—Your father is safe ; I have kept my word. It was not at all difficult. Judges are not the shrewd fellows whom they are supposed to be, for a man who knows how to convince them that they are right. They would not believe *M. Largeval* innocent because he was innocent ; I let them believe that I was a villain, and they jumped at the idea directly, because it was false. I enjoyed the fun immensely in my prison.

“Only one thing troubles me. You will think that you are indirectly the cause of my death. Do not believe it, *Mademoiselle*. I had condemned myself long ago. If I had not met you, it is probable that the sentence would have been carried out some months earlier. I thank you that I was able to use the dregs of the life that wearied me in helping an honest man.

“And I owe you gratitude for other things. You made a man of the Bohemian buffoon. Your dear face

changed me, made me something better than the vagabond whose life was passed beside a glass of punch.

"Once I thought I would ask you to do something to help me after I was dead. Pardon me; it was to come and kiss my forehead once—if you could. Think that I was raving; think that I should not dare tell you this if I did not know that it is the last thing which I shall ever tell you.

"But I am growing lamentably lachrymose, and I had made up my mind that this letter should be gay. One thing: I have not the courage to die and let you think me a thief and a murderer: I am innocent.

"Now, good-bye, and may you live long and happy. If I had been a man like other men . . . there, I am writing nonsense again. But I cannot—I cannot conceal my last secret, Geneviève—I love you, I have loved you long, and I am dying of my love. For which the good God be thanked!

"There are some pictures in Riaux's studio. Take them. Good-bye. I hope there is another world; you can guess why. Again, good-bye, dear.

"LUCIEN MONTUSSAN."

Geneviève rose and said quietly—

"Mother, take me to Riaux's studio."

Mother and daughter went out and reached the artist's studio. The dead Bohemian's timid wish was gratified. One kiss of honest love, at least, was at last pressed on his cold forehead.

Geneviève was carried home fainting. A month she

was between life and death, raving with brain-fever. When she rose at last, dull of eye, diaphanous, and languid, she asked for mourning garments. And when Gaston came to claim his wife, she gently waved his hand away, saying—

“You ought to understand that I am a widow.”

THE END.

Ballantyne Press

**BALLANTYNE, HANSON AND CO.
EDINBURGH AND LONDON**

MODERN FOREIGN LIBRARY

A SHEEP
IN
WOLF'S CLOTHING

From the French of E. Debans

BY
EVELYN JERROLD

*ONLY TRANSLATION SANCTIONED BY THE AUTHOR AND BY THE
INTERNATIONAL LITERARY ASSOCIATION*

LONDON
J. C. NIMMO & BAIN
14 KING WILLIAM STREET, STRAND, W.C.
1880

